

Kurdistan: The Stateless Nation

Four Powers, One People, Zero Sovereignty (1514-2025)

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A Case Study in Geographic Curse and Imperial Betrayal

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PART 1 OF 4: THE BROKEN PROMISE

Foundation Conditions and the Creation of Statelessness (1514-1925)

Introduction: The People Who Exist but Don't

Forty million people. Distinct language. Shared culture. Ancient homeland. Resources including oil. Everything required for statehood.

Except one thing: permission.

The Kurds are the world's largest stateless nation. They inhabit contiguous territory across four modern states—Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria—and have for centuries. They speak Kurdish (an Iranian language, not Turkish or Arabic). They have distinct cultural traditions, literature, music, identity. Their homeland—mountainous terrain stretching from southeastern Turkey through northern Iraq and northwestern Iran into northeastern Syria—has been Kurdish for over a millennium.

But Kurdistan does not exist on any official map.

This is not accident of history. This is result of deliberate decisions by external powers who divided Kurdish lands, suppressed Kurdish identity, exploited Kurdish resources, and crushed every attempt at Kurdish statehood—because having Kurdistan exist was inconvenient to empires and states controlling the territory.

The pattern spans 500+ years:

- **Ottoman Empire (1514-1918):** Incorporated Kurdish lands, extracted taxes and soldiers, allowed limited autonomy when useful, crushed resistance when inconvenient
- **British and French (1918-1923):** Promised Kurdish state, then broke promise and divided territory among Turkey, Iraq, Syria, with Iran retaining eastern portion
- **Turkey (1923-present):** Denied Kurdish existence ("Mountain Turks"), banned language, destroyed villages, killed tens of thousands
- **Iraq (1932-present):** Alternated between autonomy and genocide, used chemical weapons, destroyed 4,500+ villages
- **Iran (1925-present):** Suppressed Kurdish autonomy, executed leaders, crushed rebellions

- **Syria (1946-present):** Denied citizenship to many Kurds, suppressed culture, now allows autonomy but Turkey threatens

And most revealing:

- **United States and Western powers:** Allied with Kurds when useful (against Saddam 1991, against ISIS 2014-2019), abandoned them when inconvenient (Kissinger 1975, Trump 2019)

The constant: Kurds are used as tools serving external powers' interests, then discarded when those interests change.

This case study demonstrates:

1. **Geography can be curse:** Strategic location attracting empires guarantees subordination, not sovereignty
2. **Resources without statehood equal extraction:** Kurdish oil enriches Baghdad, Ankara, Tehran—not Kurds
3. **Being "useful" to empires doesn't create gratitude:** Every time Kurds allied with external power, they were betrayed
4. **Violence maintains statelessness:** 100,000+ Kurds killed in 20th century alone for seeking autonomy
5. **Multiple regime types, same subordination:** Ottoman imperial, European colonial, secular nationalist, Islamic theocratic, democratic—all suppressed Kurdish statehood
6. **"Allies" are temporary, geography is permanent:** US/UK repeatedly used and abandoned Kurds

The thesis: Kurdistan is most extreme example of 21st-century imperialism—not even achieving the de facto independence Taiwan has, but remaining divided and subordinated for 100+ years despite having everything traditionally required for statehood. The Kurds prove that sovereignty is granted by power, not earned through culture, population, or legitimacy.

I. The Kurdish Homeland: Geography as Destiny

The Land

Kurdistan—the name Kurds use for their homeland—encompasses approximately 190,000 square miles (roughly the size of Spain or California). The territory forms an arc through:

Turkey (Northern/Western Kurdistan - "Bakur"):

- Southeastern Turkey from Diyarbakir to Hakkari
- Approximately 15-20 million Kurds (largest Kurdish population)

- 25-30% of Turkey's total population
- Mountainous terrain including Taurus and Zagros ranges

Iraq (Southern Kurdistan - "Bashur"):

- Northern Iraq including Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Dohuk
- Approximately 6-7 million Kurds
- 15-20% of Iraq's population
- Oil-rich regions including Kirkuk

Iran (Eastern Kurdistan - "Rojhelat"):

- Western Iran including Kermanshah, Sanandaj, Mahabad
- Approximately 8-10 million Kurds
- 10-13% of Iran's population
- Mountainous border regions

Syria (Western Kurdistan - "Rojava"):

- Northern Syria along Turkish border
- Approximately 2-3 million Kurds
- 10-15% of Syria's population
- Agricultural regions, recently oil-producing

Total Kurdish population: 35-45 million (estimates vary because censuses systematically undercount or deny Kurdish identity). This makes Kurds the 4th largest ethnic group in Middle East after Arabs, Turks, and Persians.

The Strategic Value

Kurdish lands are not peripheral backwater. Kurdistan controls:

Mountain ranges: Zagros and Taurus mountains dominate terrain—providing defensive positions, controlling passes, generating water

Water resources: Tigris and Euphrates Rivers originate in Kurdish mountains—Kurdish highlands are "water tower" of Mesopotamia. Whoever controls Kurdistan controls downstream water supply.

Oil and gas: Major reserves in:

- Kirkuk region (Iraq): Some of world's largest fields
- Mosul region (Iraq): Significant reserves
- Turkish Kurdistan: Modest reserves
- Syrian Kurdistan: Discovered recently

Agricultural production: Mountain valleys and plains produce: tobacco, cotton, grain, livestock

Strategic location: Kurdistan sits at intersection of:

- Turkey (NATO member, rising regional power)
- Iran (Regional power, Shia theocracy)
- Iraq (Oil-rich, post-Saddam chaos)
- Syria (Civil war, Russian/Iranian involvement)

Controlling Kurdistan means controlling: routes between Anatolia and Mesopotamia, water supplies, oil fields, and buffer zones between rival powers.

This is why Kurdistan doesn't exist: Every surrounding state needs control over Kurdish territory for security, resources, and territorial integrity. Allowing Kurdish independence would:

- **Turkey:** Lose 25-30% of territory, lose Euphrates/Tigris headwaters, face separatist precedent
- **Iraq:** Lose oil-rich north, lose Kirkuk fields, lose territorial integrity
- **Iran:** Lose strategic border region, lose buffer, face separatist precedent (also Azeris, Arabs, Baluchis)
- **Syria:** Lose northern border, lose agricultural region

The curse: Being strategically located between rival powers means each power has interest in preventing Kurdish statehood. Kurdistan's value to surrounding states guarantees Kurdistan's subordination.

II. Early History: Kurds Before the States

Origins and Identity

Kurdish identity is ancient. The Kurds are Iranian people—linguistically and culturally related to Persians, not Arabs or Turks. Kurdish language is Northwestern Iranian, related to Persian (Farsi) but distinct. The name "Kurd" appears in historical sources from 7th century CE onward, though the people were likely present earlier under different names.

Medieval Kurdish entities existed but never unified Kurdish state:

- Various Kurdish principalities and kingdoms in medieval period
- Ayyubid Dynasty (1171-1260): Founded by Saladin (Salah ad-Din al-Ayyubi)—**Kurdish origin** (born in Tikrit, modern Iraq, to Kurdish family)
- Multiple Kurdish emirates under various empires

The significance of Saladin: Most famous Muslim leader of Crusades era was Kurdish. This is rarely emphasized in Arab nationalist narratives (claim him as "Arab hero") or Turkish narratives (ignore his Kurdish identity). Saladin recaptured Jerusalem (1187), founded dynasty ruling Egypt

and Syria. His Kurdish identity proves Kurds capable of state leadership—but Saladin never established specifically Kurdish state, ruled multi-ethnic Muslim empire.

Pre-Ottoman period: Kurdish lands were contested among:

- Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258)
- Seljuk Turks (1037-1194)
- Mongol Ilkhanate (1256-1335)
- Various regional powers

Kurds maintained distinct identity, language, culture through these empires but never achieved unified independent state.

III. Ottoman Incorporation (1514-1918): The First Partition

The Battle of Chaldiran (August 23, 1514)

Ottoman Sultan Selim I defeated Persian Safavid Shah Ismail I. This battle determined that Kurdish lands west of Lake Urmia would be Ottoman, while lands east would be Persian (later Iranian).

This was first partition of Kurdistan—splitting Kurdish homeland between two empires. The division was not based on Kurdish preferences or ethnic boundaries but on Ottoman-Persian military balance.

Kurdish Emirates Under Ottoman Rule

The Ottomans did not directly rule most Kurdish regions. Instead, they granted autonomy to local Kurdish emirates in exchange for:

- Recognizing Ottoman suzerainty
- Paying tribute
- Providing military forces when required
- Maintaining order and border defense

Major Kurdish emirates included:

- **Emirate of Bitlis** (1182-1847)
- **Emirate of Hakkari** (semi-autonomous)
- **Emirate of Soran** (1816-1835)
- **Emirate of Baban** (1649-1850)

This system gave Kurds significant local autonomy. Kurdish emirs ruled Kurdish-majority regions, collected taxes, administered justice, maintained armies. Kurdish language and culture flourished. Kurdish literature developed.

Why Ottomans Allowed Autonomy

The calculation was strategic:

1. **Buffer against Persia:** Kurdish emirates defended eastern Ottoman frontier
2. **Difficult terrain:** Mountains made direct rule expensive
3. **Military value:** Kurdish cavalry were excellent fighters—used in Ottoman armies
4. **Cost-benefit:** Local autonomy was cheaper than direct administration

As long as Kurdish emirs remained loyal, paid tribute, and provided soldiers, Ottomans left them alone.

The Ottomans Centralize (19th Century)

Sultan Mahmud II (1808-1839) began centralizing Ottoman state:

- Abolished Janissaries (1826)
- Established modern army
- Reduced provincial autonomy
- Imposed direct administration

Kurdish emirates were targeted:

- **1835:** Emirate of Soran destroyed after rebellion
- **1847:** Emirate of Bitlis abolished
- **1850:** Emirate of Baban abolished

The pattern: Ottoman reformers viewed Kurdish autonomy as obstacle to modernization. They replaced emirates with direct Ottoman governors, imposed Ottoman law, conscripted Kurdish men into Ottoman army.

Kurdish Resistance to Centralization

1826-1838: Mir Muhammad of Rawanduz rebelled against Ottoman centralization, seeking to unite Kurdish emirates. Ottoman forces crushed rebellion, executed leaders.

1880: Sheikh Ubaidullah Uprising attempted to create independent Kurdish state uniting Ottoman and Persian Kurdistan. The rebellion crossed Ottoman-Persian border, threatening both empires. Ottomans and Persians cooperated to suppress it. Sheikh Ubaidullah was captured, exiled, died in prison.

The pattern established: When Kurds sought autonomy within Ottoman system, they were tolerated if useful. When Kurds sought independence or unity across borders, they were crushed—and rival empires would cooperate to prevent Kurdish statehood threatening both.

World War I: The Opportunity and Betrayal

1914-1918: Ottoman Empire entered World War I allied with Germany and Austria-Hungary against British, French, and Russian empires.

Kurdish position was divided:

- Some Kurdish leaders stayed loyal to Ottomans
- Others saw opportunity: British and Russians both courted Kurdish support
- Kurds fought on multiple sides—some in Ottoman army, others rebelling with British/Russian support

The British promises: Britain encouraged Arab and Kurdish revolts against Ottomans, promising independence after war. T.E. Lawrence ("Lawrence of Arabia") worked with Arab leaders. British agents made similar promises to Kurdish leaders.

The reality: Britain and France had different plans.

IV. The Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916): Dividing the Spoils

May 16, 1916: British diplomat Mark Sykes and French diplomat François Georges-Picot signed secret agreement dividing Ottoman Arab provinces between British and French spheres.

The map they drew created:

- **French zone:** Syria, Lebanon, southern Turkey, northern Iraq (Mosul)
- **British zone:** Iraq (minus Mosul initially), Palestine, Jordan
- **Russian zone** (never implemented due to 1917 revolution): Eastern Anatolia, Ottoman Armenia, Turkish Kurdistan

Kurdistan's fate: Not mentioned specifically. Kurdish regions were divided among zones without consulting Kurds or considering Kurdish identity.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement is infamous for:

1. Secret colonial division of Middle East
2. Creating artificial states ignoring ethnic boundaries
3. Establishing borders causing conflicts for century afterward

For Kurds, the significance was existential: While Arabs got promised states (which became Iraq, Syria, Jordan, etc.), Kurds were not even mentioned. Their lands were treated as territory to divide, not homeland of distinct people deserving consideration.

V. The Treaty of Sèvres (August 10, 1920): The Promise

The Paris Peace Conference (1919-1920) determined WWI settlement. The Ottoman Empire—defeated, occupied by Allied forces, government collapsed—faced partition.

The Treaty of Sèvres between Allies and Ottoman Empire included:

Articles 62-64: Provisions for Kurdistan

Article 62: "A Commission sitting at Constantinople and composed of three members appointed by the British, French and Italian Governments respectively shall draft within six months from the coming into force of the present Treaty a scheme of local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas..."

Article 63: "The Turkish Government hereby agrees to accept and execute the decisions of both the Commissions mentioned in Article 62 within three months from their communication to the said Government."

Article 64: "If within one year from the coming into force of the present Treaty the Kurdish peoples within the areas defined in Article 62 shall address themselves to the Council of the League of Nations in such a manner as to show that a majority of the population of these areas desires independence from Turkey, and if the Council then considers that these peoples are capable of such independence and recommends that it should be granted to them, Turkey hereby agrees to execute such a recommendation, and to renounce all rights and title over these areas."

Translation:

1. Kurds in Ottoman Turkey would get local autonomy immediately
2. Within one year, Kurds could petition League of Nations for independence
3. If majority wanted independence and League approved, Turkey would accept
4. Kurdistan would become independent state

Map included with treaty showed proposed Kurdistan including:

- Southeastern Anatolia (modern Turkey)
- Northern Mesopotamia (modern Iraq)
- Possibly portions of Syria

The size: Approximately 60,000-80,000 square miles with population of 2-3 million Kurds.

This was the promise: International treaty recognizing Kurdish right to statehood. For first time in modern history, Kurdish independence was legally provided for by great powers.

Why the promise was made:

The Allies were dividing Ottoman Empire. They planned to:

- Create Armenian state (Articles 88-93)
- Create Greek control of Izmir region (Article 69)
- Internationalize Constantinople/Istanbul (Articles 36-49)
- Reduce Turkey to rump state in central Anatolia

Kurdistan fit the strategy: Weaken Turkey by removing Kurdish regions, create buffer state under British influence, secure northern Iraq oil fields (discovered around Mosul).

Kurdish reaction: Enthusiasm mixed with caution. Kurdish leaders understood this was chance for statehood. But they also knew promises could be broken—British had already begun retreating from promises to Arabs.

VI. The Turkish War of Independence (1919-1923): Everything Changes

The Sèvres Treaty was never ratified. While diplomats were negotiating in Paris, Turkey was fighting.

Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk) organized Turkish resistance:

- Rejected Sèvres terms as humiliating
- Established Turkish Grand National Assembly in Ankara (April 23, 1920)
- Built nationalist army
- Fought Greek, Armenian, and French forces

The Turkish victories:

- **1919-1920:** Defeated Armenian forces, absorbed proposed Armenian state
- **1920-1921:** Defeated French in southern Turkey, forced French withdrawal from Cilicia
- **1922:** Defeated Greek forces, recaptured Izmir, drove Greeks from Anatolia
- **1922:** Abolished Ottoman Sultanate

Kurdish position during Turkish War of Independence:

Initial cooperation: Many Kurdish tribal leaders supported Mustafa Kemal because:

- Shared Muslim identity against Christian powers (Greeks, Armenians)
- Opposed Sèvres partition
- Kemal promised Muslim solidarity, autonomy for Kurds in new Turkey

Kemal's promises to Kurds: In seeking Kurdish support, Kemal emphasized:

- Turkey as Muslim state (not ethnic Turkish state)
- Partnership between Turks and Kurds
- Autonomy for Kurdish regions
- Representation in Ankara government

The calculation: Kurds faced choice—support Sèvres (promise of independence from weakened Ottomans) or support Kemal (partnership in new strong Turkey). Many chose Kemal, believing promises of autonomy and fearing Sèvres was unenforceable given Turkish military success.

By 1922-1923: Turkish forces had:

- Expelled Greek forces
- Controlled all of Anatolia including Kurdish regions
- Established effective government in Ankara
- Forced Allies to renegotiate

The Treaty of Sèvres was dead. New negotiations began.

VII. The Treaty of Lausanne (July 24, 1923): The Betrayal

The new treaty between Turkey and Allies replaced Sèvres. The terms were dramatically different:

What Turkey gained:

- Recognition of Turkish sovereignty over Anatolia
- No Armenian state (Armenia already absorbed)
- No Kurdistan (Articles 62-64 deleted entirely)
- No Greek control of Izmir
- Turkey retains control of Mosul (later transferred to British Iraq in 1926)
- Eastern Thrace in Europe retained

What Turkey gave up:

- Ottoman Arab provinces (already lost)

- Capitulations (foreign legal privileges)
- Some Aegean islands to Greece

What happened to Kurdistan provisions:

DELETED. Articles 62-64 from Sèvres were completely removed from Lausanne. There was no mention of:

- Kurdish autonomy
- Kurdish independence
- Kurdish rights
- Kurdish people

The Treaty of Lausanne was negotiated between:

- Turkey (Mustafa Kemal's government)
- Britain, France, Italy, Japan, Greece, Romania, Yugoslavia

Kurds were not represented. No Kurdish delegation was present. No Kurdish consent was sought.

The significance:

In three years, international status of Kurds went from:

- **1920 (Sèvres):** Legal right to autonomy and potential independence
- **1923 (Lausanne):** Not mentioned at all, erased from international law

Why the reversal?

1. Turkish military victory: Kemal proved Turkey could not be partitioned. Allies faced choice: fight another war or accept Turkish state. They chose acceptance.

2. British priorities shifted:

- **Mosul oil:** Britain wanted northern Iraq oil fields more than Kurdish state
- **Stability:** Kurdish state would destabilize region, complicate British control of Iraq
- **French agreement:** Britain and France agreed to divide oil revenues, not support Kurdish independence

3. Soviet factor: Soviets supported Kemal against Western imperialism. Kurdish state might have been anti-Soviet (Kurds in Soviet territory also seeking autonomy).

4. Kurds' weakness: Kurds had no army, no unified leadership, no leverage. They depended entirely on British support. When Britain abandoned them, they had nothing.

The British Betrayal

Britain—which had promised Kurdish independence—abandoned Kurds for:

- Oil access (Mosul)
- Good relations with Turkey (NATO ally later)
- Stability in Iraq (British mandate)

The Kurds were betrayed not once but systematically:

- **Sèvres (1920):** Promise made
- **British-Turkish negotiations (1923):** Promise abandoned
- **Lausanne (1923):** Promise erased from treaty

Three years from promise to erasure.

VIII. The Partition Finalized (1923-1926): Four Prisons

The Treaty of Lausanne established modern Turkey including Kurdish regions. But Iraq-Turkey border remained disputed—specifically Mosul region (Kurdish-majority, oil-rich).

1926: League of Nations Decision

The League awarded Mosul to Iraq (British mandate) rather than Turkey. Britain had argued:

- Mosul was historically part of Baghdad province
- Britain could better protect minorities (including Kurds)
- Oil revenues would benefit Iraq

The hypocrisy: Britain claimed to protect Kurdish rights while denying them independence. Mosul was valuable for oil, not humanitarian concern.

The result: Kurdistan divided four ways:

1. Turkish Kurdistan (1923-present)

- Approximately 60,000 sq mi
- 15-20 million Kurds (largest Kurdish population)
- Became part of Turkish Republic
- Secular, nationalist state denying Kurdish identity

2. Iraqi Kurdistan (1926-present)

- Approximately 40,000 sq mi
- 6-7 million Kurds
- British mandate (1920-1932), then Iraqi state

- Oil-rich regions including Kirkuk
- Arabs ruled Kurds (until 1991 autonomy)

3. Iranian Kurdistan (1514-present, confirmed 1923)

- Approximately 50,000 sq mi
- 8-10 million Kurds
- Remained part of Persia/Iran (never part of Ottoman Empire)
- Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979), then Islamic Republic

4. Syrian Kurdistan (1923-present)

- Approximately 7,000 sq mi
- 2-3 million Kurds
- French mandate (1923-1946), then Syrian state
- Smallest Kurdish population, least autonomy (until 2012)

The new borders:

- Divided Kurdish families, tribes, communities
- Separated Kurdish regions from each other
- Created minorities in four states
- No Kurdish state emerged

The maps:

- **Before WWI:** Kurdish lands mostly within Ottoman Empire (unified)
- **After Lausanne:** Kurdish lands divided among Turkey, Iraq, French Syria, Iran

The consequences:

1. Kurds became minorities everywhere:

- In Turkey: 15-20% of population
- In Iraq: 15-20% of population
- In Iran: 10-13% of population
- In Syria: 10-15% of population

In each state, Kurds were outnumbered by Turks, Arabs, or Persians—meaning democratic majority rule guaranteed Kurdish subordination.

2. Each state had interest in suppressing Kurdish identity:

- Kurdish autonomy in Turkey would encourage Iraqi Kurds
- Kurdish autonomy in Iraq would encourage Turkish Kurds
- Any Kurdish success threatened territorial integrity of all four states
- Result: All four states cooperated informally to prevent Kurdish statehood

3. Kurds had no leverage:

- No international support (great powers abandoned them)
- No unified leadership (divided among four states)
- No state apparatus (no army, no government)
- No legal recognition (Lausanne erased them from international law)

4. The precedent was established:

- Promises to Kurds could be broken without consequence
 - Great powers would prioritize relations with Turkey/Iraq/Iran over Kurdish rights
 - Strategic interests (oil, stability, NATO alliance) trumped self-determination
 - Kurds were useful as tools (British used them against Ottomans) but expendable afterward
-

IX. Atatürk's Turkey (1923-1938): Denying Kurdish Existence

Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) established Turkish Republic on principles of:

- Secular nationalism
- Turkish ethnic identity
- Westernization
- Centralized state

The Kurdish problem:

- 15-20% of population was Kurdish
- Kurdish regions in southeast were mountainous, poor, tribal
- Kurdish identity threatened Turkish nationalism's claim that Turkey was homogeneous Turkish nation

Atatürk's solution: Deny Kurdish existence.

The official Turkish position (1923-1991):

- There are no Kurds in Turkey
- Eastern Anatolia residents are "Mountain Turks"—ethnic Turks whose language became corrupted from living in mountains
- Kurdish language is not distinct language but dialect of Turkish
- Kurdish identity is invention of foreign powers trying to divide Turkey
- Anyone claiming to be Kurdish is separatist traitor

The policies:

1924: Ban on Kurdish schools

- All education must be in Turkish
- Kurdish-language instruction prohibited
- Kurdish history not taught

1925: Ban on Kurdish language in public

- Government offices: Turkish only
- Courts: Turkish only
- Official documents: Turkish only
- Publishing in Kurdish: illegal
- Speaking Kurdish could result in arrest

1925: Ban on Kurdish names

- Towns, villages, mountains renamed with Turkish names
- People required to adopt Turkish surnames (Surname Law 1934)
- "Kurdistan" officially removed from maps

1925: Ban on Kurdish cultural expression

- Kurdish music: banned
- Kurdish clothing: banned in cities
- Kurdish celebrations: banned
- Even word "Kurd" became taboo

The enforcement:

- Police monitored Kurdish-speaking households
 - Teachers punished students speaking Kurdish
 - Employers fired workers using Kurdish
 - Cultural assimilation was forced
-

X. The Sheikh Said Rebellion (1925): The First Crushed Uprising

February 13, 1925: Kurdish uprising led by Sheikh Said, Kurdish religious leader, began in southeastern Turkey.

The rebellion's goals:

- Restore Islamic law (Turkey had become secular)
- Kurdish autonomy
- Opposition to Kemalist reforms

The scale:

- 15,000+ rebels
- Seized Diyarbakir province
- Controlled several cities

Turkish response:

March 1925: Turkish military crushed rebellion within weeks using:

- Modern army (rebels had rifles, army had artillery and aircraft)
- Martial law in eastern provinces
- Mass arrests

The aftermath:

- **Sheikh Said: captured, tried, executed** June 1925
- **45 rebellion leaders: executed**
- **15,000+ Kurds killed** in suppression and aftermath
- **7,500+ deported** from Kurdish regions
- **Thousands imprisoned**

The political consequences:

June 1925: Law on the Maintenance of Order

- Gave government extraordinary powers
- Allowed suppression of opposition
- Used to crush Kurdish identity

March 1925: Closure of Kurdish organizations

- All Kurdish cultural associations shut down
- Kurdish publishing houses closed
- Kurdish intellectuals arrested

The lesson taught: Rebellion equals death. Kurdish autonomy is impossible. Turkish state will use unlimited violence to maintain territorial integrity.

The lesson learned (by Turkish state): Kurds had not been assimilated despite official denial. Kurdish identity was real, Kurdish demands for autonomy were genuine, and Kurds would rebel if given opportunity.

The response: Intensify assimilation and suppression.

XI. The Dersim Massacre (1937-1938): Annihilation Campaign

Dersim (later renamed Tunceli) was mountainous Kurdish region in eastern Turkey inhabited by Alevi Kurds (heterodox Shia Muslim sect).

The "problem" from Turkish state perspective:

- Dersim remained largely autonomous—tribal structures intact, limited state control
- Population resisted assimilation
- Region was armed and rebellious
- Represented challenge to central authority

1935-1936: Turkish military buildup in region. Roads constructed, troops deployed, local leaders arrested.

1937: Rebellion triggered when Turkish forces arrested tribal chiefs. Kurdish tribes resisted arrest, attacked military columns.

The Turkish response: Total war.

1937-1938: The Campaign

Military force:

- 50,000+ troops deployed
- Air force used (bombing Kurdish villages)
- Chemical weapons allegedly used (disputed)
- Scorched earth tactics

The methods:

- Villages burned (dozens destroyed)
- Forced relocations
- Mass executions
- Caves sealed with people inside (suffocation)
- Systematic destruction of Kurdish tribal structure

The death toll:

- Official Turkish records: ~13,000 killed

- Kurdish sources: 40,000-70,000 killed
- Historians estimate: 13,000-40,000 (wide range due to Turkish records suppression)

What is certain: Tens of thousands of Kurdish civilians killed, hundreds of villages destroyed, entire region depopulated and forcibly assimilated.

1938: Region renamed "Tunceli" (Turkish name replacing Kurdish Dersim). The name change symbolized Turkish state's determination to erase Kurdish identity.

The significance:

This was not counter-insurgency. This was annihilation campaign designed to:

- Destroy Kurdish tribal structures permanently
- Terrorize Kurdish population into submission
- Demonstrate that resistance would result in extermination
- Complete Turkish control over last autonomous Kurdish region in Turkey

Atatürk's role: The campaign occurred at end of Atatürk's rule (he died November 1938). Whether he personally ordered Dersim operation is debated, but campaign reflected his regime's determination to forcibly assimilate Kurds.

XII. Iraqi Kurdistan Under British Mandate (1920-1932): Divide and Rule

While Turkey was crushing Kurdish rebellions, Iraqi Kurds faced different form of subordination.

The British Mandate (1920-1932) governed Iraq including Kurdish regions around Mosul, Sulaymaniyah, and Erbil.

British colonial policy toward Kurds:

1. Divide and Rule

- Played Kurdish tribes against each other
- Rewarded loyal tribal leaders with positions and money
- Punished resistant leaders
- Prevented Kurdish unity

2. Tribal hierarchy

- Strengthened tribal chiefs' power
- Made chiefs dependent on British patronage

- Bypassed educated urban Kurds
- Preserved "traditional" structures beneficial to British control

3. Limited autonomy promises

- British claimed Mosul should be Iraq (not Turkey) because they'd protect Kurdish rights
- Once Mosul was secured (1926), promises disappeared
- Some Kurdish officials appointed to junior positions
- No meaningful autonomy granted

The oil factor:

Kirkuk oil fields discovered 1927. British petroleum companies secured concessions. The oil was in Kurdish regions but:

- Revenues went to British companies and Iraqi government
- Kurds received minimal benefit
- British ensured Kurdish regions remained under Baghdad control
- Oil wealth made Kurdish independence impossible—Britain wouldn't allow it

Kurdish rebellions under British:

1919: Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji Rebellion

- Sheikh Mahmud declared independent Kurdish Kingdom of Kurdistan
- British forces crushed rebellion using RAF bombing
- Sheikh Mahmud captured, exiled to India, later returned and rebelled again (1922-1924)
- Finally defeated 1924, lived under house arrest until death

1930s: Barzani revolts

- Ahmed Barzani led tribal revolts against Iraqi government
- British and Iraqi forces suppressed
- Pattern: Periodic Kurdish uprisings, consistent British/Iraqi suppression

1932: Iraqi independence from British mandate. Iraq became kingdom under Hashemite monarchy. British withdrew direct rule but retained:

- Military bases
- Oil concessions
- Advisory role
- Ability to intervene

Kurdish status in independent Iraq:

- Minorities without autonomy
- Ruled by Arab monarchy

- No protection for Kurdish rights despite British promises to League of Nations
 - Pattern established: Arab rule, Kurdish subordination, British complicity
-

XIII. Iranian Kurdistan (1919-1925): Brief Hope, Crushed

Iranian Kurds had never been Ottoman—they were Persian/Iranian for centuries. But they also never had independence.

1918-1921: Simko Shikak revolt

Simko Shikak, Kurdish tribal leader in northwestern Iran, established de facto independent Kurdish region during:

- World War I chaos
- Russian Empire collapse
- Persian government weakness

At peak (1920-1921): Simko controlled region around Lake Urmia, collected taxes, ruled as autonomous Kurdish leader.

Persian response:

Reza Khan (later Reza Shah Pahlavi) led military coup in Persia (1921), became Prime Minister (1923), abolished Qajar dynasty and crowned himself Shah (1925).

1922: Reza Khan's forces defeated Simko, recaptured northwestern Iran. Simko fled to Iraq, returned multiple times, finally assassinated by Iranian agents (1930).

Reza Shah's policies (1925-1941):

Similar to Atatürk in Turkey:

- Persian nationalism
- Centralization
- Forced assimilation
- Suppression of minority identities

Kurdish policies:

- Kurdish language restricted (but not banned as severely as Turkey)
- Kurdish leaders co-opted or arrested
- Tribal autonomy reduced
- Military garrisons in Kurdish regions

Less severe than Turkey but still subordinating: Iranian Kurds were acknowledged as Kurds (unlike Turkey's "Mountain Turks" fiction) but denied political autonomy or cultural rights.

Conclusion Part 1: The Foundation of Statelessness

By 1925, Kurdistan's fate was sealed:

1. Divided among four states

- Turkey: 15-20 million Kurds, most repressed
- Iraq: 6-7 million Kurds, British/Arab rule
- Iran: 8-10 million Kurds, Persian rule
- Syria: 2-3 million Kurds, French/Arab rule

2. International law erased Kurdish statehood

- Sèvres (1920): promised independence
- Lausanne (1923): erased provisions
- League of Nations: confirmed division

3. Every rebellion crushed with mass violence

- Sheikh Said (1925): 15,000+ killed
- Simko (1922): Defeated
- Sheikh Mahmud (1919-1924): Defeated
- Pattern: Resistance = annihilation

4. Cultural genocide began

- Turkish: Banned language, denied existence
- Iraqi: Denied rights, subordinated to Arabs
- Iranian: Restricted culture, suppressed autonomy
- Syrian: Minimal presence, ignored

5. Oil wealth extracted, not shared

- Kirkuk fields (Iraq): British/Iraqi control
- Revenues enriched Baghdad, London—not Kurds
- Resource curse: Oil made Kurdish regions valuable, preventing independence

6. Great powers established betrayal pattern

- Britain: Promised independence, delivered partition
- France: Divided Syrian Kurds from Iraq/Turkey

- All powers: Prioritized relations with Turkey/Iraq over Kurdish rights

The foundation for 100 years of statelessness was complete.

The next 100 years would repeat the pattern:

- Kurds rebel seeking autonomy
- States crush rebellions with mass violence
- External powers use Kurds when useful, abandon when inconvenient
- Oil wealth extracted from Kurdish regions
- Culture suppressed
- But 40 million Kurds survive, maintaining identity despite everything

The pattern is consistent: Geography cursed Kurds. Being divided among four rival states meant each state had interest in preventing Kurdish statehood. Having resources (oil, water, strategic location) made Kurdish regions too valuable to grant independence. Being useful to external powers (British against Ottomans, US against Saddam, US against ISIS) meant being used and abandoned repeatedly.

Kurdistan proves: Sovereignty is not earned through having distinct identity, ancient homeland, millions of people, or resources. Sovereignty is granted by powers controlling territory. And powers controlling Kurdish territory have spent 100 years ensuring Kurdistan remains concept, not country.

END PART 1

Part 2 will examine: The Middle Years of Repression (1925-1991)—Turkish military coups and PKK insurgency, Iraqi Ba'athist genocide and Anfal Campaign, Iranian Islamic Revolution and Kurdish suppression, Syrian Ba'athist rule, and Kissinger's betrayal (1975) of Iraqi Kurds after US used them against Iraq, demonstrating pattern of external powers using and abandoning Kurds for strategic convenience.

Kurdistan: The Stateless Nation (Part 2 of 4)

The Long Repression (1925-1991)

Introduction: Sixty-Six Years of Crushing Autonomy

Between 1925 and 1991, the pattern repeated across four states:

Kurds rebel → State crushes rebellion with mass violence → External power uses Kurds as proxy → External power abandons Kurds → Kurds rebel again → Cycle continues.

The scale of violence escalated:

- **1925:** Sheikh Said rebellion, 15,000+ killed
- **1937-38:** Dersim massacre, 13,000-70,000 killed
- **1961-1991:** Iraqi Kurdish rebellion (multiple phases), 100,000+ killed
- **1984-1991:** PKK insurgency begins, 40,000+ killed by 1991 (300,000+ total by 2025)
- **1988:** Anfal Campaign, 50,000-182,000 killed including chemical weapons

The death toll: **200,000-400,000 Kurds killed** 1925-1991 for seeking autonomy.

But Kurds survived. The identity persisted. The demand for statehood continued. And external powers—Britain, United States, Soviet Union, Iran (pre-revolution)—repeatedly used Kurdish rebellions to pressure Iraq and Turkey, then abandoned Kurds when convenient.

The Kissinger Betrayal (1975) epitomizes the pattern: US and Iran armed Iraqi Kurds to weaken Iraq, achieved their goal (forcing Iraq to make territorial concessions to Iran), then abandoned Kurds to Iraqi reprisal. Thousands died. Henry Kissinger's response when confronted: "Covert action should not be confused with missionary work."

This part covers four parallel stories:

1. **Turkey:** Military coups preserving Kemalist denial, PKK insurgency beginning
2. **Iraq:** Ba'athist dictatorship, multiple betrayals, Anfal genocide
3. **Iran:** Shah's dictatorship, Islamic Revolution, both suppressing Kurds
4. **Syria:** Ba'athist one-party state, denying citizenship, minimal autonomy

The thesis remains: Kurdistan's statelessness is not accident but result of deliberate policies by four states cooperating informally to prevent Kurdish autonomy, backed by external powers prioritizing strategic interests over self-determination.

I. Turkey: Military Guardians of Kemalist Denial (1938-1980)

İsmet İnönü succeeded Atatürk as President (1938-1950). He continued policies:

- Kurdish language banned
- Kurdish identity denied
- "Eastern provinces" under military control
- Assimilation enforced through education

1946: Multi-party politics allowed. Democrat Party challenged Republican People's Party (Atatürk's party). But on Kurdish question, both parties agreed: no autonomy, no recognition, continued assimilation.

1950: Democrat Party victory. Adnan Menderes became Prime Minister. Some liberalization occurred:

- Economic development
- Religious freedoms restored (Atatürk's secularism relaxed)
- But Kurdish identity still denied

Kurdish activism (1950s):

- Kurdish students and intellectuals in cities began organizing
- Publication of Kurdish materials attempted (immediately banned)
- Cultural associations proposed (denied)

The state's response: Any Kurdish political activity was "separatism" punishable by imprisonment.

May 27, 1960: First Military Coup

Turkish military overthrew Menderes government, claiming to protect Kemalist principles. Menderes was tried and executed (September 1961).

The military's role: Turkish Armed Forces saw themselves as guardians of:

- Secular state
- Kemalist ideology
- Territorial integrity

The Kurdish implications: Military was most committed to denying Kurdish identity. Every military intervention reinforced:

- Ban on Kurdish language
- Suppression of Kurdish political activity
- Control over "Eastern provinces"

1961: New Constitution provided more freedoms but explicitly banned:

- "Activities aimed at destroying national unity"
- This clause used to criminalize Kurdish political organizing

1960s: Kurdish activism increases despite repression:

- **1965:** Kurdish intellectuals attempted founding Kurdish Democratic Party of Turkey (immediately banned)
- Underground Kurdish publications circulated
- University students organized
- Workers in cities maintained Kurdish identity

March 12, 1971: Second Military Coup ("Coup by Memorandum")

Military forced government resignation, imposed martial law in Kurdish regions, arrested hundreds of Kurdish activists, banned Kurdish organizations.

The pattern: Every attempt at political organization met with military intervention and mass arrests.

1970s: The Prelude to PKK

Economic factors:

- Kurdish regions remained poorest in Turkey
- Unemployment high
- Land concentrated in tribal leaders' hands
- Urban migration created Kurdish proletariat in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir

Political radicalization:

- Kurdish students influenced by: Marxism, anti-colonial movements, Palestinian resistance
- Saw Kurdish struggle as both national liberation and class struggle
- Rejected tribal leadership as collaborationist
- Sought armed revolution

1973: Abdullah Öcalan (born 1949, Kurdish family in southeastern Turkey) studying political science at Ankara University, began forming group that would become PKK.

September 12, 1980: Third Military Coup

Most severe coup yet. Military under General Kenan Evren seized power, claiming Turkey faced chaos from right-wing and left-wing terrorism.

The crackdown:

- 650,000+ arrested
- 230,000+ tried in military courts
- 517 sentenced to death (50 executed)
- 30,000+ fled country
- Torture systematic in prisons
- Political parties banned
- Universities purged
- Press censored

Kurdish-specific repression:

- Kurdish regions under especially harsh martial law
- Speaking Kurdish in public could result in arrest and beating
- Kurdish names for children: banned
- Kurdish music cassettes: confiscated
- Thousands of Kurds imprisoned for "separatism"

November 27, 1978: PKK Founded (announced publicly later)

Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers' Party) formed by Abdullah Öcalan and group of Kurdish Marxist revolutionaries.

Ideology:

- Marxist-Leninist
- Kurdish national liberation
- Armed struggle as only path
- Rejection of tribal structures
- Goal: Independent, socialist Kurdistan

Strategy:

- Guerrilla warfare
- Target Turkish state institutions in Kurdish regions
- Build support among Kurdish peasants and workers
- Force Turkey to acknowledge Kurdish existence

The timing: Founded just before military coup (1980). The coup's repression radicalized more Kurds, providing recruits for PKK.

1984: PKK Launches Insurgency (covered in detail in Part 3, but beginning here)

August 15, 1984: PKK guerrillas attacked Turkish military installations in Erzurum and Şemdinli, killing 24 soldiers and 9 civilians.

The Turkish-PKK war had begun. It would kill 40,000+ by 2000, continue to 2025, and become Turkey's longest and bloodiest conflict.

II. Iraq: From Monarchy to Ba'athist Genocide (1932-1991)

1932: Iraqi independence from British mandate. Hashemite Kingdom of Iraq established under King Faisal I.

Kurdish status:

- Minority without autonomy
- Ruled by Arab monarchy and government
- British promises of protection forgotten
- Oil revenues from Kurdish Kirkuk went to Baghdad

1943: Mulla Mustafa Barzani's first rebellion

Mulla Mustafa Barzani (1903-1979) was Kurdish tribal leader from Barzan region (northern Iraq). He led multiple rebellions:

1943-1945: Rebelled against Iraqi government and British. Defeated, fled to Iran.

1946: Republic of Mahabad (covered in Iran section below)

Barzani joined short-lived Kurdish republic in Iranian Kurdistan. When it fell (1946), fled to Soviet Union, lived in exile until 1958.

July 14, 1958: Iraqi Revolution

Military officers led by Abd al-Karim Qasim overthrew monarchy. King Faisal II assassinated. Iraq became republic.

Qasim's initial Kurdish policy: Conciliatory

- Allowed Barzani to return from Soviet exile
- Recognized Kurds and Arabs as "partners" in Iraqi state
- Draft constitution mentioned Kurdish rights

But: No autonomy granted. Kurdish language recognized but not implemented. Promises remained promises.

1961: Kurdish Rebellion Begins

September 1961: Barzani launched rebellion demanding:

- Kurdish autonomy within Iraq
- Recognition of Kurdish rights
- Share of oil revenues
- Cultural and linguistic rights

The First Kurdish War (1961-1970):

Iraqi response: Military campaigns against Kurdish regions

- Villages bombed
- Populations displaced
- 10,000+ killed (estimates vary)

Kurdish resistance: Guerrilla warfare

- Mountainous terrain favored Kurds
- Iraqi army couldn't defeat Barzani's peshmerga ("those who face death")
- Stalemate developed

February 8, 1963: Ba'athist Coup

Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party seized power (briefly). Abd al-Salam Arif became president after removing Ba'athists.

Kurdish policy: More repressive than Qasim

- Intensified military campaigns
- Arabization of Kurdish regions began
- Kirkuk targeted for demographic change

November 1963: Arif removes Ba'athists from power, but anti-Kurdish policies continue.

1966: Arif dies, succeeded by brother Abd al-Rahman Arif.

July 17, 1968: Second Ba'athist Coup

Ba'ath Party returned to power, this time permanently. Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr became president, but real power held by Saddam Hussein (Vice President).

The Ba'athist ideology:

- Arab nationalism
- Socialism (nominally)

- One-party state
- Pan-Arabism (unity of Arab world)

The Kurdish problem for Ba'athists: Kurds aren't Arabs. Kurdish identity and autonomy contradict Arab nationalist ideology requiring all Iraqi citizens identify as Arabs.

March 11, 1970: Kurdish Autonomy Agreement

After years of fighting, Iraqi government and Barzani signed agreement providing:

- Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq
- Kurdish as official language alongside Arabic
- Kurdish participation in government
- Share of oil revenues
- Implementation within 4 years

This appeared to be breakthrough: First time Arab government recognized Kurdish autonomy.

The reality: Agreement was tactical, not sincere.

1970-1974: Arabization Continues

Despite agreement, Iraqi government:

- Continued settling Arabs in Kirkuk (oil-rich city claimed by Kurds)
- Displaced Kurdish residents
- Redrew boundaries of "autonomous region" to exclude oil fields
- Built military installations in Kurdish regions
- Arrested Kurdish activists

Barzani's response: Protested violations but did not resume rebellion—yet.

Why wait?: Barzani had external support lined up.

III. The Kissinger Betrayal (1972-1975): The Ultimate "Use and Abandon"

The Shah's Ambition

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (Shah of Iran, 1941-1979) had territorial dispute with Iraq over Shatt al-Arab waterway (forms part of Iran-Iraq border, provides Iraq's only access to Persian Gulf).

1969: Iraq and Iran nearly went to war over waterway. Neither side won.

The Shah's strategy: Weaken Iraq by supporting Kurdish rebellion. If Iraqi military was fighting Kurds in north, Iraq couldn't fight Iran over waterway.

Enter the United States

1972: Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger (National Security Advisor, later Secretary of State) visited Iran.

The Shah proposed: Iran and US jointly support Barzani's Kurds against Iraqi government. This would:

- Weaken Iraq (Soviet ally)
- Give Iran leverage over waterway dispute
- Cost US minimal (Iran would fund, US would provide weapons)

Kissinger agreed. The operation began.

The support (1972-1975):

- **Iran provided:** Money (\$5+ million annually), weapons, safe haven, training
- **US provided:** Weapons, intelligence, communications equipment
- **Israel provided:** Weapons and training (Israeli intelligence cooperated)

The scale:

- Tens of millions of dollars
- Modern weapons including artillery
- CIA operatives in Kurdistan coordinating

Barzani's position:

- Received assurances from US and Iran
- Believed he had superpower backing
- Prepared for final push against Baghdad

1974: Agreement deadline passes

Iraqi government's 4-year deadline for implementing 1970 autonomy agreement expired. Implementation had been minimal.

March 1974: Barzani rejected Iraqi autonomy proposal (which excluded Kirkuk and provided less autonomy than 1970 agreement).

The Second Kurdish War (1974-1975):

April 1974: Full-scale war resumed between Iraqi government and Kurdish peshmerga.

Iraqi offensive:

- 90,000+ troops
- Air force bombed Kurdish villages
- Systematic destruction
- Goal: Crush Kurdish rebellion permanently

Kurdish resistance:

- 50,000+ peshmerga
- Controlled mountainous regions
- US/Iranian weapons effective
- Inflicted heavy casualties on Iraqi army

By late 1974: Stalemate. Iraqi army controlled cities and plains, Kurds controlled mountains. Iraqi casualties mounting.

Iraq was desperate.

March 6, 1975: Algiers Agreement

Iraq and Iran signed agreement:

- **Iraq conceded:** Shatt al-Arab waterway boundary adjusted in Iran's favor
- **Iran agreed:** End all support for Iraqi Kurdish rebellion immediately

The Shah got what he wanted: Waterway concession. Kurdish rebellion was just leverage.

The US position: Kissinger agreed to Iranian decision. US support ended same day.

March 1975: Support Ends

Iran closed border. No more weapons, money, safe haven. CIA operatives withdrew.

Barzani's desperate appeals:

- Telegrams to Nixon and Kissinger begging support
- Reminders of promises made
- Warnings of massacre if abandoned

Kissinger's response: Nothing. Silence.

Kurdish collapse:

March-April 1975: Without external support, Kurdish rebellion collapsed within weeks.

- Peshmerga surrendered or fled

- 200,000+ Kurdish refugees fled to Iran (Iran admitted them temporarily)
- Iraqi army occupied all Kurdish regions

The Iraqi reprisal:

- Mass arrests of Barzani supporters
- Executions of captured peshmerga (estimates: 1,000-5,000)
- Forced relocations (100,000+ Kurds moved from border regions)
- Destruction of villages (hundreds destroyed)
- Intensified Arabization

Barzani's fate:

- Fled to Iran, then to US
- Lived in exile
- Died in Washington DC (1979), broken and betrayed
- His sons would continue Kurdish struggle

The Congressional Investigation

1976: Pike Committee (House Select Committee on Intelligence) investigated US covert operations including Iraqi Kurds.

The Report's conclusions:

- Operation was never intended to achieve Kurdish autonomy
- Goal was solely to pressure Iraq into concessions to Iran
- Kurds were expendable pawns
- US deliberately misled Kurdish leaders about commitment

The famous exchange:

Pike Committee: What about the Kurds?

Kissinger: "Covert action should not be confused with missionary work."

Translation: We used them. They were useful. Now they're not. This is how geopolitics works.

The death toll: Estimates vary—5,000-10,000 killed in reprisal, 200,000+ refugees, hundreds of villages destroyed.

The lesson Kurds learned:

- External powers' promises are worthless
- US will use Kurds when convenient
- US will abandon Kurds when convenient
- Never trust outside support

- But what choice do Kurds have?

The pattern confirmed: This was not first or last betrayal, just most documented. British (1923), US (1975), and later US again (2019) all repeated pattern: use Kurds as proxies, achieve strategic goal, abandon Kurds to face consequences.

IV. Iraq Under Saddam (1979-1991): Escalation to Genocide

July 16, 1979: Saddam Hussein forced President al-Bakr to resign. Saddam became President and began consolidating total power.

July 1979: The Purge

Days after taking power, Saddam convened Ba'ath Party meeting. He announced "conspiracy" and read names. As each name was called, the accused was dragged from room.

- 68 officials arrested
- 22 executed (including senior Ba'ath Party members)
- Hundreds more purged in following weeks

The message: Total loyalty required. Opposition equals death.

Kurdish policy under Saddam:

1979: Kurdish autonomy remained nominal. Kurdish region had local government but:

- Real power held by Baghdad-appointed officials
- Security controlled by Iraqi intelligence
- Oil revenues went to Baghdad
- Arabization continued

1980-1988: Iran-Iraq War

September 22, 1980: Iraq invaded Iran, beginning 8-year war.

Kurdish position: Divided and exploited

- **Iraqi Kurds:** Split between supporting Iraq or rebelling
- **Jalal Talabani** (rival to Barzani family) founded Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) 1975, sometimes cooperated with Iraq against Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)
- **Massoud Barzani** (son of Mulla Mustafa) led KDP, allied with Iran against Saddam

The pattern: Iraqi government and Iranian government both supported Kurds in enemy territory while suppressing Kurds in own territory.

Iraqi response to Kurdish-Iranian cooperation:

1983-1984: Barzani clan arrests

- Iraqi forces arrested 8,000+ males from Barzani tribe
- Ages 13-70
- Taken to southern Iraq
- **Never seen again**
- Presumed executed and buried in mass graves

This was prelude to larger campaign.

1987-1988: The Anfal Campaign

Al-Anfal means "the spoils" in Arabic (Quranic reference). Iraqi regime's codename for operation to eliminate Kurdish resistance.

February 1988-September 1988: Systematic military campaign against Kurdish civilians.

The Commander: Ali Hassan al-Majid ("Chemical Ali"), Saddam's cousin, given authority over Kurdistan. His orders: "I will kill them all with chemical weapons!"

The Phases (8 phases total):

Anfal I (February 23-March 19, 1988): Targeted Sulaymaniyah region

- Villages surrounded
- Men separated from women and children
- Men executed (estimates: 3,000-5,000)
- Villages destroyed
- Chemical weapons used

Anfal II-VII (March-August 1988): Continued throughout Kurdish regions

- Same pattern repeated
- Each phase targeted different region
- Systematic destruction

Anfal VIII (August 25-September 6, 1988): Final phase, Badinan region

The Methods:

Village destruction:

- 4,500+ Kurdish villages destroyed
- Bulldozed after evacuation or bombardment
- Agriculture destroyed
- Infrastructure demolished

Population displacement:

- 1.5 million+ Kurds displaced
- Forced into "collective towns" (camps)
- Conditions were prison-like
- Movement restricted

Mass executions:

- Males age 15-70 separated from families
- Transported to southern Iraq
- Executed
- Buried in mass graves

The death toll:

- **Iraqi government records:** 100,000+ killed
- **Kurdish sources:** 182,000+ killed
- **Human Rights Watch:** 50,000-100,000 killed
- **Disappeared:** 182,000 (names documented)

Chemical weapons used:

March 16, 1988: Halabja

Most infamous attack occurred during Anfal.

Halabja was Kurdish town near Iranian border, population ~70,000.

March 16-17, 1988: Iraqi aircraft dropped chemical weapons on Halabja.

The weapons:

- Mustard gas
- Sarin nerve gas
- Tabun nerve gas
- VX (possibly)

The attack:

- Multiple sorties over two days
- Bombs and artillery shells

- Gas heavier than air, sank into basements where people hid

The death toll:

- **Immediate deaths:** 3,200-5,000 (estimates vary)
- **Injured:** 7,000-10,000
- **Long-term effects:** Cancer, birth defects, respiratory diseases continue

Survivor testimonies:

- "The sky turned yellow"
- "Birds fell from sky dead"
- "Smell like apples" (chemical agent smell)
- "Children died instantly"
- "Entire families found dead in basements"

Iranian response: Iranian forces entered Halabja day after attack, documented massacre, provided medical care, photographed victims.

The photographs: Images of dead Kurdish children, families, animals became iconic evidence of chemical weapons use against civilians.

International response at the time:

United States: Condemned attack but continued supporting Iraq (US was backing Iraq against Iran in war)

United Nations: Weak condemnation, no action

Western governments: Continued arms sales to Iraq

The pattern: Kurdish lives were less important than strategic interests in Iran-Iraq War. Western powers wanted Iraq to counter Iran. Kurdish genocide was acceptable price.

Why Anfal?

Official Iraqi justification: Kurds were supporting Iran during war, therefore traitors deserving punishment.

Actual reasons:

1. **Eliminate Kurdish resistance:** Destroy villages supporting peshmerga
2. **Arabization:** Clear Kurdish areas for Arab settlement
3. **Control oil regions:** Consolidate control over Kirkuk and other oil areas
4. **Terrorize population:** Make Kurdish resistance impossible through fear
5. **Genocide:** Eliminate Kurdish population

Was Anfal genocide?

Genocide Convention definition: Acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.

Evidence of genocidal intent:

- Systematic targeting of Kurdish civilians (not combatants)
- Mass executions of males
- Chemical weapons against civilian populations
- Destruction of 4,500 villages (intent to destroy Kurdish society)
- Iraqi documents using language like "eliminate" and "cleanse"

Legal findings:

- **Iraqi High Tribunal (2006):** Found Anfal was genocide
- **Ali Hassan al-Majid:** Convicted of genocide, crimes against humanity, sentenced to death, executed 2010
- **International consensus:** Most historians and human rights organizations classify Anfal as genocide

Anfal's end:

August 20, 1988: Iran-Iraq War ended with UN ceasefire.

September 6, 1988: Anfal Campaign officially ended.

The result:

- Kurdish resistance crushed
- 50,000-182,000 Kurds dead
- 1.5 million displaced
- 4,500 villages destroyed
- Kurdish society traumatized
- Saddam consolidated control

But Kurdish identity survived. Peshmerga regrouped. And within 3 years, opportunity would come.

V. Iran: Shah to Supreme Leader, Kurds Suppressed Throughout (1925-1991)

1925-1941: Reza Shah's Centralization

Reza Shah Pahlavi modernized Iran but suppressed minorities:

- Persian nationalism promoted
- Kurdish autonomy eliminated
- Tribal leaders co-opted or crushed
- Kurdish language restricted in schools

1941: British and Soviet forces occupied Iran, forced Reza Shah to abdicate. Son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi became Shah (ruled 1941-1979).

1941-1946: WWII Chaos Creates Opportunity

Soviet forces occupied northwestern Iran including Kurdish regions.

January 22, 1946: Republic of Mahabad

Mahabad was Kurdish town in northwestern Iran. Under Soviet occupation, Kurdish nationalists declared:

Republic of Mahabad (also called Kurdish Republic)

Leadership:

- **Qazi Muhammad** (judge, moderate nationalist)
- **Mulla Mustafa Barzani** (fled from Iraq, brought peshmerga)

Territory: Small region around Mahabad

Government: Democratic institutions, Kurdish language official, schools in Kurdish

Support: Soviet Union provided weapons and protection (as part of Soviet strategy to pressure Iranian government)

Duration: 11 months

Soviet withdrawal (May 1946): Soviets negotiated with Iranian government, agreed to withdraw from Iran in exchange for oil concessions.

December 15, 1946: Iranian forces recaptured Mahabad

Republic collapsed immediately.

The reprisal:

- **Qazi Muhammad:** Arrested, tried for treason, **hanged March 31, 1947** in Mahabad's main square
- **Other leaders:** Executed

- **Mulla Mustafa Barzani:** Fled with peshmerga to Soviet Union (lived in exile until 1958)

Significance of Mahabad:

- Only time in modern history Kurds established independent state (even if briefly)
- Proved Kurds capable of governance
- Became symbol for Kurdish nationalism
- But also demonstrated pattern: External power (Soviet Union) supported Kurds for strategic reason, then abandoned them when deal was reached

1946-1979: Shah's Dictatorship

Mohammad Reza Shah ruled with increasing authoritarianism:

- SAVAK (secret police) suppressed opposition
- Kurdish cultural expression restricted
- Kurdish political organizing banned
- Development in Kurdish regions minimal

But: Less severe than Turkey or Iraq

- Kurdish identity not denied (unlike Turkey's "Mountain Turks")
- Kurdish language not completely banned
- No mass killings (unlike Iraq's Anfal)

Relative tolerance because:

- Shah was secure (US support, oil wealth, strong military)
- Iranian nationalism was civic (based on Persian culture) not purely ethnic
- Kurds were 10% of population, less threatening than in Turkey (20%) or Iraq (20%)

1972-1975: Shah's use of Iraqi Kurds (covered above)

Shah supported Barzani's rebellion to pressure Iraq, then abandoned Kurds when he got waterway concession. Pattern repeated.

1979: Islamic Revolution

January 1979: Shah fled Iran.

February 1979: Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile.

April 1979: Islamic Republic established.

Kurdish hopes: Revolution might bring autonomy. Khomeini had promised minorities would have rights in Islamic Republic.

Kurdish disappointment:

August 1979: Khomeini declared jihad against Kurdish rebellion

Kurdish leaders had demanded autonomy. Khomeini refused, declaring Kurds who sought autonomy were enemies of Islam and revolution.

August-December 1979: Iranian military campaign against Kurdish regions

- Revolutionary Guards deployed
- Kurdish peshmerga resisted
- Thousands killed (estimates: 10,000+)
- Kurdish leaders executed

Why Khomeini opposed Kurdish autonomy:

1. Islamic Republic based on religious identity, not ethnic—autonomy for Kurds would encourage other ethnic groups (Azeris, Arabs, Baluchis)
2. Kurdish regions strategic (border with Iraq, Turkey)
3. Revolutionary ideology required centralizing power, not granting autonomy

1980-1988: Iran-Iraq War and Kurds

Iranian government strategy:

- Suppress Iranian Kurds
- Support Iraqi Kurds against Saddam
- Same hypocrisy as all regional powers

Iranian Kurdish parties:

- **KDPI (Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran):** Founded 1945, led by Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou
- **Komala:** Marxist Kurdish organization

Both fought Iranian government, allied with Iraq (enemy of my enemy).

July 13, 1989: Assassination of Ghassemlou

Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, KDPI leader, was in Vienna for negotiations with Iranian government representatives.

The meeting: Supposedly to discuss peace and Kurdish autonomy.

The result: Iranian agents assassinated Ghassemlou and two associates during "negotiations."

The message: Even talking about Kurdish autonomy equals death.

1979-1991: Islamic Republic's Kurdish policy

Continued suppression:

- Kurdish political parties banned
- Kurdish language in schools restricted
- SAVAK replaced by VEVAK (new intelligence service), equally brutal
- Kurdish activists arrested, tortured, executed
- Periodic military campaigns

The pattern in Iran: Whether secular monarchy (Shah) or Islamic theocracy (Khomeini), Kurdish autonomy was rejected. Regime type changed, Kurdish subordination continued.

VI. Syria: The Forgotten Kurds (1946-1991)

1946: Syrian independence from French mandate.

Kurdish population:

- 300,000-500,000 in 1946
- Concentrated in northeastern Syria along Turkish border
- Qamishli, Kobani (Ayn al-Arab), Afrin were main Kurdish cities

1946-1963: Parliamentary period

Syria had democratic elections and parliamentary government (unstable, frequent coups, but elections occurred).

Kurdish status:

- Not recognized as minority
- No autonomy
- Assimilation policies
- But less repressive than Turkey or Iraq

March 8, 1963: Ba'athist Coup

Syrian Ba'ath Party seized power. Arab nationalism became state ideology.

Hafez al-Assad (Alawite minority member) rose through Ba'ath ranks, seized power in 1970 coup, ruled until death (2000).

Ba'athist Kurdish policy:

1962 Census: Syrian government conducted census in Kurdish regions with explicit goal of reducing Kurdish population numbers.

The result:

- 120,000 Kurds (20% of Syrian Kurdish population) stripped of citizenship
- Declared "foreigners" (ajanib)
- Claimed they were illegal immigrants from Turkey (false—most families lived there for generations)
- Could not: vote, own property, work in government, obtain passports, legally marry

Why strip citizenship?:

- Reduce Kurdish political power
- Facilitate Arabization
- Justify land confiscation
- Delegitimize Kurdish claims

The "Arab Belt" Plan (1965):

Syrian government plan to settle Arab farmers along Turkish border in Kurdish regions:

- Confiscate Kurdish lands
- Settle Arabs in new villages
- Create Arab majority buffer along border
- Prevent Kurdish connection to Turkish Kurds

Implementation:

- Thousands of Arab families settled
- Kurdish villages renamed with Arabic names
- Kurdish lands confiscated

Kurdish cultural suppression:

- Kurdish language banned in schools
- Kurdish publications banned
- Kurdish political organizing illegal
- Teaching Kurdish: illegal
- Even naming children with Kurdish names: banned

1970-2000: Hafez al-Assad's dictatorship

Assad's regime was brutal police state:

- Mukhabarat (intelligence services) monitored population

- Political opposition crushed (Hama massacre 1982: 10,000-40,000 killed crushing Muslim Brotherhood)
- One-party state
- Emergency law (martial law) from 1963-2011

Kurdish policy under Assad:

- Continued denial of citizenship to 120,000+ Kurds (number grew to 300,000 by 2011 as descendants inherited statelessness)
- Continued Arabization
- Arrested Kurdish activists
- Banned Kurdish parties

But: Less violent than Turkey's PKK war or Iraq's Anfal because:

- Syrian Kurds were only 10% of population (smaller threat)
- Assad regime secure (brutal repression of all opposition, not just Kurds)
- No major Kurdish rebellion (Kurdish parties existed but mostly underground)

The paradox:

- Syria brutally suppressed Syrian Kurds
- Syria supported PKK (Turkish Kurdish rebels) against Turkey (regional rival)
- Pattern: Every state suppressed own Kurds while using enemy's Kurds

1991: Syrian Kurdish situation

By end of period covered in this Part:

- 300,000+ stateless Kurds
- No autonomy
- No recognition
- Culture suppressed
- But: No genocide (unlike Iraq), no mass war (unlike Turkey-PKK)

Syrian Kurds were the "forgotten Kurds"—overlooked while Iraqi and Turkish Kurds grabbed headlines.

This would change in 2011 (covered Part 4).

VII. The Kurdish Diaspora: Exile and Organizing

Millions of Kurds fled throughout 20th century:

- From Turkey: 500,000+ fled political persecution
- From Iraq: 200,000+ fled 1975 collapse, 1+ million fled Anfal
- From Iran: 100,000+ fled after 1979 revolution
- From Syria: Small numbers until 2011

Destinations:

- **Europe:** Germany (largest Kurdish diaspora outside Middle East—800,000+), Sweden, France, UK
- **North America:** US, Canada (smaller numbers)
- **Australia**

Kurdish organizations in exile:

Political parties in exile:

- Iraqi Kurdish parties (KDP, PUK) maintained offices in Europe and US
- Iranian KDPI operated from Iraqi Kurdistan
- Turkish Kurdish organizations (later PKK-linked) in Europe

Cultural preservation:

- Kurdish language schools (teaching children Kurdish language banned at home)
- Kurdish media (radio, TV, newspapers in Kurdish)
- Cultural organizations

Lobbying and advocacy:

- Human rights organizations documenting atrocities
- Lobbying Western governments
- Seeking international recognition

The challenge: Divided diaspora

- Turkish, Iraqi, Iranian, Syrian Kurds organized separately
- Tribal and political divisions persisted in exile
- No unified Kurdish voice

But: Diaspora preserved Kurdish identity and provided international voice during worst repression.

VIII. International Response to Kurdish Suffering (1925-1991)

League of Nations (1920s-1930s):

- Sèvres promised autonomy (1920)
- Lausanne erased provisions (1923)
- No enforcement of Kurdish rights
- Accepted Turkey's position

United Nations (1945-1991):

- No action on Kurdish autonomy
- Weak responses to violence
- Security Council avoided issue (Turkey and Iraq were member states with sovereignty)

Western Powers:

United States:

- 1975: Used and abandoned Iraqi Kurds
- 1988: Condemned Halabja but continued supporting Iraq
- Provided weapons to Turkey (NATO ally) used against PKK
- Strategic interests (containing Iran, maintaining Turkey alliance) trumped Kurdish rights

United Kingdom:

- 1923: Betrayed Sèvres promises
- Post-WWII: Minimal concern for Kurdish rights
- Maintained good relations with Iraq (oil interests)

France:

- Divided Syrian Kurds from Turkey and Iraq
- Minimal interest in Kurdish autonomy

Soviet Union:

- 1946: Supported Mahabad briefly, then abandoned
- Used Kurds as pressure point against pro-Western regimes
- No genuine support for Kurdish independence

The pattern among great powers: Use Kurds when strategically convenient, abandon when inconvenient, never support actual Kurdish statehood because it would anger Turkey, Iraq, Iran (all important for various strategic reasons).

Human Rights Organizations (post-1970s):

Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, others documented:

- Turkish torture of Kurdish prisoners
- Iraqi Anfal genocide
- Iranian executions of Kurdish leaders
- Syrian citizenship denial

The impact: Raised awareness but didn't change policies. Western governments acknowledged abuses but prioritized strategic relationships.

Conclusion Part 2: The Long Repression Established the Pattern

By 1991, the pattern was clear:

1. Violence maintains subordination

- Turkey: 40,000+ killed in PKK war (1984-1991)
- Iraq: 50,000-182,000 killed in Anfal (1988)
- Iran: 10,000+ killed suppressing post-revolution Kurdish rebellion (1979)
- Syria: Smaller scale but systematic suppression
- **Total 1925-1991: 200,000-400,000+ Kurds killed** for seeking autonomy

2. All regime types suppress Kurds

- Turkey: Secular military guardianship
- Iraq: Ba'athist dictatorship
- Iran: Monarchy then Islamic theocracy
- Syria: Ba'athist one-party state
- **Ideology doesn't matter—suppression is constant**

3. External powers use and abandon Kurds

- Britain (1920s)
- Soviet Union (1946)
- US and Iran (1975)
- **Pattern repeats: promises, use as proxies, betrayal**

4. Oil wealth prevents independence

- Kirkuk fields make Iraqi Kurdistan too valuable to Baghdad
- Kurdistan independence would cost Iraq 40% of oil revenue
- Turkey, Iran also have oil in Kurdish regions
- **Resources curse Kurds—valuable territories cannot become independent**

5. Geographic division prevents unity

- 40 million Kurds divided among 4 states
- Each state has interest preventing Kurdish unification
- Cross-border cooperation difficult
- **Division guarantees weakness**

6. International community complicit

- League of Nations abandoned Kurds (1923)
- UN took no action on genocide (1988)
- Western powers prioritized strategic interests
- **Great powers' indifference enables repression**

But Kurds survived:

Despite:

- 200,000-400,000 killed
- 4,500 villages destroyed (Iraq alone)
- Language banned (Turkey)
- Genocide (Iraq)
- Repeated betrayals

Kurdish identity persisted:

- 40 million Kurds still identified as Kurdish
- Language survived underground
- Culture maintained in diaspora and homes
- Demand for autonomy never disappeared

1991 would bring opportunity: Gulf War would create autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan. But autonomy is not independence. The trap would deepen.

The questions for Part 3:

When opportunity finally came (1991), could Kurds achieve actual statehood? Or would pattern continue—limited autonomy that could be revoked, external support that could be withdrawn, promises that could be broken?

The next 25 years (1991-2014) would answer: Kurds could achieve autonomy within states, economic development, even democracy. But sovereignty? Independence? Statehood?

That remained forbidden.

END PART 2

Part 3 will examine the "False Dawn" (1991-2014): Gulf War creating Iraqi Kurdistan autonomy, oil wealth creating Kurdish elite, Barzani and Talabani families becoming wealthy while preventing actual independence, Turkish-PKK war intensifying, Syrian civil war creating Rojava, and continuing pattern of external powers using Kurds (US against Saddam 1991-2003, US against ISIS 2014+) while denying statehood.

Kurdistan: The Stateless Nation (Part 3 of 4)

The False Dawn (1991-2014)

Introduction: Autonomy Is Not Sovereignty

1991 looked like breakthrough. After decades of genocide and suppression, Iraqi Kurds finally achieved what they'd sought since 1920s: autonomy.

The United States—the same power that had abandoned them in 1975—established no-fly zone protecting Iraqi Kurdistan from Saddam's forces. Kurdish parties formed regional government. Kurdish language became official. Kurdish flag flew. For first time in modern history, Kurds governed themselves.

But autonomy is not independence.

Iraqi Kurdistan remained:

- Part of Iraq legally (no international recognition as state)
- Dependent on external protection (US/UK no-fly zone)
- Economically dependent on Baghdad (budget, oil revenues)
- Surrounded by hostile powers (Turkey, Iran, Syria all opposed Kurdish statehood)
- Subject to Iraqi sovereignty (regional government, not state)

And the autonomy came with price:

- Kurdish civil war (1994-1998): 3,000-5,000 killed as Barzani and Talabani families fought for control
- Oil wealth enriched Kurdish elite: Barzani and Talabani families became billionaires while ordinary Kurds remained poor
- Turkey intensified war against PKK: 20,000+ killed 1991-2014
- Damascus, Tehran, Ankara united in opposition to any independence move
- US used Kurds against Saddam (2003 Iraq War) but explicitly opposed Kurdish independence

By 2014, Iraqi Kurdistan had:

- Functioning government
- Oil production (400,000+ barrels/day)
- GDP of \$20+ billion

- Peshmerga army (200,000+ troops)
- Universities, infrastructure, development

But still: No independence, no sovereignty, no statehood.

This Part demonstrates:

- Kurds can achieve autonomy within states
- Kurds can develop economically
- Kurds can govern themselves effectively
- But Kurds cannot become independent state because surrounding powers united in preventing it, external powers prioritizing regional stability over Kurdish self-determination, and oil wealth making Kurdish regions too valuable to grant independence.

The "False Dawn": Progress that conceals continued subordination. Democracy that masks dependency. Development that enriches elite while preserving statelessness.

I. The Gulf War and Safe Haven (1990-1992)

August 2, 1990: Iraq Invades Kuwait

Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, claiming historical Iraqi sovereignty. The world condemned. United Nations demanded withdrawal.

January 17, 1991: Operation Desert Storm

US-led coalition (32 countries) began air war against Iraq. Ground invasion followed February 24.

February 28, 1991: Ceasefire

100-hour ground war ended. Iraqi forces expelled from Kuwait. Saddam's military devastated—300,000+ casualties, thousands of tanks and aircraft destroyed.

Kurdish position during war:

Iraqi Kurdish leaders (Barzani's KDP, Talabani's PUK) allied with US-led coalition, provided intelligence, hoped for Saddam's overthrow.

March 1, 1991: President George H.W. Bush's call

Bush publicly encouraged Iraqis to "take matters into their own hands" and overthrow Saddam.

The uprisings began.

II. The 1991 Kurdish Uprising and Betrayal

March 4-5, 1991: Kurdish cities rise

Spontaneous uprisings across Iraqi Kurdistan:

- **Ranya (March 4): Kurdish peshmerga seized control**
- **Sulaymaniyah (March 7): Mass demonstrations, Iraqi garrison fled**
- **Erbil (March 11): Fell to peshmerga**
- **Kirkuk (March 19): Oil city seized by Kurds**
- **Dohuk (March 20): Under Kurdish control**

Within two weeks: Iraqi Kurdistan liberated. Kurdish flags flew. Saddam's administration collapsed. Ba'athist officials fled or were killed.

Simultaneously: Shia uprising in southern Iraq (also responding to Bush's call).

Kurdish hopes:

- **Saddam would fall**
- **Iraq would democratize**
- **Kurds would get genuine autonomy or independence**
- **US would support**

March 1991: Saddam's counterattack

Iraqi Republican Guard (elite units) redeployed from Kuwait front. Saddam still had:

- **Helicopter gunships (allowed under ceasefire terms)**
- **Armor and artillery**
- **Chemical weapons capability**

March 28-April 3: The Crushing

Iraqi forces recaptured Kurdish cities systematically:

- **Kirkuk recaptured March 28 (Kurds held it 9 days)**
- **Erbil fell March 30**
- **Sulaymaniyah fell April 3**

The methods:

- Helicopter gunships strafing civilians
- Artillery bombardment of cities
- Indiscriminate killing
- Threats of chemical weapons (not used, but threat enough)

The Kurdish response: Panic and flight.

April 1991: The Exodus

2 million Kurds fled—largest refugee crisis since WWII:

- 1.5 million fled to Turkish border (Turkey closed border initially)
- 500,000 fled to Iranian border (Iran admitted some)
- Hundreds of thousands displaced internally

The conditions:

- Mountainous terrain, winter weather
- No shelter, limited food and water
- Children and elderly dying (exposure, disease, dehydration)
- Death toll: 20,000-50,000 (estimates) died during exodus

International media coverage:

- CNN broadcast images of Kurdish refugees
- Children dying in mountains
- Families stranded at Turkish border
- International outcry

The US response:

Initially: Nothing. Bush administration refused intervention.

The calculation:

- Ceasefire achieved (Kuwait liberated)
- Overthrowing Saddam not part of UN mandate
- US forces already withdrawing
- Intervention would complicate exit

But public pressure mounted. The images were devastating.

April 5, 1991: UN Security Council Resolution 688

Condemned Iraqi repression, demanded Iraq allow humanitarian access, but:

- No authorization for military intervention

- No enforcement mechanism
- Iraq could ignore (and did)

April 10, 1991: Operation Provide Comfort

US, UK, France established:

- No-fly zone north of 36th parallel (prohibiting Iraqi aircraft)
- Safe haven for Kurdish refugees
- Humanitarian aid delivery

US military presence:

- Aircraft enforcing no-fly zone from Turkish bases
- Ground forces temporarily in northern Iraq (withdrew by July)
- Warning to Saddam: attack Kurds again and we respond

The result:

- Iraqi forces withdrew from most of Kurdistan (not Kirkuk)
- Refugees returned (most by mid-1991)
- Kurdish region effectively autonomous under US protection

But this was half-measure:

- Saddam remained in power
- Iraqi government still claimed Kurdistan
- Shia uprising in south crushed (no safe haven for them)
- Turkey reluctant host (feared Kurdish autonomy encouraging Turkish Kurds)

The betrayal:

Bush had called for uprisings. Kurds and Shia responded. US did nothing while Saddam crushed Shia rebellion. US intervened for Kurds only after international outcry and refugee crisis.

The lesson repeated: US encourages Kurdish resistance, then watches Kurds get slaughtered, finally intervenes with minimum commitment after maximum suffering.

But the outcome: For first time since 1920s, Kurds controlled Kurdish regions without state interference.

III. Building Iraqi Kurdistan (1991-2003)

May 1992: First Kurdish Elections

Iraqi Kurdish parties held elections for:

- **Kurdish Parliament (50 seats initially, expanded to 111)**
- **Kurdish leadership**

Results:

- **KDP (Barzani): 45%**
- **PUK (Talabani): 44%**
- **Smaller parties: 11%**

Nearly tied. This foreshadowed problems.

The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) formed:

- **Prime Minister appointed**
- **Ministries established (finance, interior, peshmerga, education, health, etc.)**
- **Kurdish became official language**
- **Erbil designated capital**

What KRG controlled:

- **Three provinces: Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Dohuk (Iraqi government held Kirkuk)**
- **Population: 3-4 million Kurds**
- **Territory: ~40,000 square kilometers**

What KRG didn't control:

- **Kirkuk (oil-rich city, 80 miles south of autonomous region)**
- **International borders (Turkey and Iraq controlled crossings)**
- **Iraqi government maintained economic siege**

The economic siege (1991-1996):

Saddam's response to Kurdish autonomy:

- **Withdrew Iraqi dinars from circulation in Kurdistan (making currency worthless)**
- **Cut salaries for government employees in Kurdistan**
- **Blockaded food and medicine**
- **Prohibited trade**

UN sanctions (imposed after Kuwait invasion):

- **Banned Iraqi oil exports**
- **Created humanitarian crisis across Iraq**

- Kurdistan suffered despite US protection

The result: Severe poverty, unemployment 50%+, infrastructure collapse, schools and hospitals lacking supplies.

The revenue crisis:

- KRG had no independent revenue source initially
- Relied on: smuggling (Turkish border trade), taxation (limited), international aid
- Could not pay government employees or peshmerga

The divisions deepen:

Geographic split:

- KDP dominated Erbil and Dohuk (western Kurdistan)
- PUK dominated Sulaymaniyah (eastern Kurdistan)

Revenue competition:

- Turkish border trade (western): KDP controlled, collected fees
- Iranian border trade (eastern): PUK controlled
- Both parties hoarded revenues instead of sharing

Tribal and political differences:

- Barzanis were tribal leaders with rural base
- Talabani was urban intellectual with leftist background
- Mutual suspicion and rivalry

Family dynasties:

- Massoud Barzani (Mulla Mustafa's son): KDP leader
- Jalal Talabani: PUK leader
- Both had ambitions to dominate Kurdistan

IV. The Kurdish Civil War (1994-1998): Brothers Kill Brothers

May 1994: Fighting Begins

Disputes over revenues and territory erupted into armed conflict.

The spark: Competition over Erbil (capital).

May-November 1994: First phase

- KDP and PUK peshmerga fought for control of Erbil
- Hundreds killed in street fighting
- Both sides committed atrocities

December 1994: Ceasefire (brief, collapsed)

1995-1996: Fighting intensifies

Alliances with enemies:

August 31, 1996: KDP invites Saddam

Massoud Barzani, desperate to defeat PUK, made deal with Saddam Hussein:

- Iraqi forces entered Kurdistan
- Attacked PUK positions
- Seized Erbil, Sulaymaniyah
- Killed PUK members and Iraqi opposition figures (Iraqi National Congress offices in Erbil)

Death toll from Iraqi intervention: 700+ executed, hundreds arrested.

The irony: Barzani allied with Saddam—the same Saddam who:

- Killed Barzani's father and brothers
- Gassed Halabja
- Destroyed 4,500 Kurdish villages
- Committed Anfal genocide

But Barzani needed Saddam's armor and artillery to defeat PUK.

US response:

- Extended no-fly zone south to 33rd parallel (to protect PUK in Sulaymaniyah from Iraqi attack)
- Evacuated Iraqi opposition figures to Guam
- Condemned Barzani-Saddam cooperation
- But didn't intervene directly

September 1996: PUK counterattack with Iranian help

Talabani's PUK, now on defensive, sought help from Iran:

- Iranian Revolutionary Guards supported PUK
- Iran provided weapons and intelligence

- PUK recaptured Sulaymaniyah

The irony: Both Kurdish parties allied with enemies who had killed Kurds for decades.

The civil war toll:

- Direct combat deaths: 3,000-5,000 (estimates vary)
- Civilians killed: Unknown hundreds in crossfire
- Displaced: 100,000+ fled fighting
- Infrastructure destroyed: Schools, hospitals, government buildings damaged
- Economy devastated: Already poor Kurdistan became poorer

Why the civil war happened:

1. Revenue competition:

- Limited resources (siege economy)
- Border trade worth millions monthly
- Neither party would share

2. Power struggle:

- Both leaders wanted to dominate Kurdistan
- Parliament was deadlocked
- Violence seemed easier than compromise

3. External manipulation:

- Saddam exploited KDP-PUK rivalry
- Iran exploited rivalry
- Turkey exploited rivalry (supported KDP against PUK and PKK)

4. Lack of Kurdish unity:

- Tribal loyalties stronger than Kurdish nationalism
- Family dynasties prioritized power over people
- No tradition of democratic conflict resolution

September 1998: Washington Agreement

US mediated ceasefire. Barzani and Talabani signed agreement in Washington DC:

- Formal end to civil war
- Revenue sharing (not implemented)
- Joint government (not implemented)

The reality:

- Fighting stopped but Kurdistan remained divided
- KDP controlled west (Erbil, Dohuk)
- PUK controlled east (Sulaymaniyah)
- Two parallel administrations
- Two flags, two cabinets, two budgets

This division lasted until 2006 (after US invasion unified them through external pressure).

The lessons:

1. Autonomy doesn't guarantee unity:

- Kurds fought each other as bitterly as they fought Saddam
- Kurdish nationalism wasn't strong enough to overcome factional rivalry

2. Elite power competition:

- Barzani and Talabani families prioritized control over Kurdish welfare
- Thousands of Kurds died so two families could compete for dominance

3. External powers exploit divisions:

- Saddam, Iran, Turkey all manipulated Kurdish factions
- Kurdish disunity made them vulnerable

4. US wouldn't intervene:

- US protected Kurdistan from Saddam
- But wouldn't stop Kurds from killing each other
- Limited commitment

V. Oil Wealth and Elite Enrichment (1996-2003)

1996: Oil-for-Food Program

UN established program allowing Iraq to sell oil (despite sanctions) to buy food and medicine.

The allocation to Kurdistan: 13% of revenues (roughly proportional to population).

The money flow:

- UN held revenues
- Released funds for approved projects

- Theoretically for humanitarian needs

But: Kurdistan finally had revenue.

1997-2003: Development begins

The oil-for-food money enabled:

- Reconstruction of war-damaged infrastructure
- Salaries for government employees and peshmerga
- Schools and hospitals reopened
- Universities expanded
- Roads repaired

GDP growth:

- 1991-1996: Collapse (sanctions and siege)
- 1997-2003: 10-15% annual growth

But distribution was unequal:

The Barzani family empire:

- KDP controlled: western Kurdistan, Turkish border crossings, Erbil region
- Revenue sources: Border taxes (trucks entering from Turkey paid fees), oil-for-food allocation, smuggling (fuel, cigarettes, other goods)
- Estimated Barzani family wealth by 2003: \$100+ million (likely much higher, exact figures secret)

The Talabani family empire:

- PUK controlled: eastern Kurdistan, Iranian border, Sulaymaniyah region
- Revenue sources: Border taxes (Iranian trade), oil-for-food allocation, smuggling
- Estimated Talabani family wealth by 2003: \$100+ million

The mechanisms of enrichment:

1. Border taxes:

- Trucks crossing from Turkey paid \$500-2,000 per crossing
- Thousands of trucks daily
- Revenues in millions monthly
- Went to party coffers, not public budget

2. Fuel smuggling:

- Iraqi fuel sold at subsidized prices

- Smuggled to Turkey, sold at market prices
- Profits enormous
- Barzani and Talabani families controlled smuggling

3. Construction contracts:

- Oil-for-food funded reconstruction
- Contracts awarded to family-connected companies
- Kickbacks standard practice
- Public projects enriched private contractors

4. Land speculation:

- KRG officials allocated prime land to themselves and allies
- Land values increased with development
- Fortunes made in real estate

5. Government positions:

- Ministers, senior officials collected salaries and side payments
- Licensing fees, permits required bribes
- Corruption systematic

The elite class emerged:

The two families (Barzani, Talabani) at top

Below them:

- Senior party officials
- Peshmerga commanders
- Tribal leaders allied with parties
- Business owners with political connections

The statistics (estimates, transparency lacking):

Top 1% wealth share: 40-50% of Kurdistan's wealth Top 10% wealth share: 70-80%

Bottom 50% wealth share: 5-10%

Gini coefficient: 0.40-0.45 (high inequality)

Ordinary Kurds:

- Government salaries: \$50-200/month
- Peshmerga wages: \$100-300/month
- Private sector wages: \$100-400/month
- Unemployment: 20-30%

The pattern: Oil wealth enriched elite, development improved living standards marginally, but inequality was extreme.

Compared to rest of Iraq: Kurdistan was prosperous (no Saddam's terror, relative stability, development).

Compared to promises: Elite captured benefits while masses remained poor.

The Barzani and Talabani families became dynasties:

- Control over parties (KDP, PUK) was hereditary
- Government positions allocated to family members
- Business empires expanded
- No accountability (no transparency, no elections 1992-2005)

This pattern continues to 2025: Same families still control Kurdistan, now billionaires, while ordinary Kurds face unemployment and poverty.

VI. Turkey: The PKK War Intensifies (1991-1999)

The PKK insurgency (begun 1984) intensified after Gulf War created Kurdish safe haven in Iraq.

Abdullah Öcalan's strategy:

- Use Iraqi Kurdistan as rear base
- Launch attacks into Turkey from Iraq
- Recruit among Turkish Kurds radicalized by repression
- Force Turkey to negotiate Kurdish autonomy

1991-1999: The bloodiest phase

Turkish military operations:

Frequent cross-border raids into Iraq:

- Turkey claimed to pursue PKK
- Operations destroyed Kurdish villages in Iraqi Kurdistan (not just PKK bases)
- Iraqi Kurds (KRG) couldn't stop Turkey (needed Turkey's goodwill)

Domestic counterinsurgency:

- Turkish army deployed 200,000+ troops in southeastern Turkey
- Village evacuations: 3,000+ Kurdish villages forcibly depopulated

- 2-3 million Kurds displaced (forced to cities)
- Scorched earth: Destroy PKK's rural support base
- Village guards: Armed Kurdish tribal militias to fight PKK (15,000+ village guards by 1999)

The tactics:

Turkish forces:

- Air strikes on suspected PKK positions (villages destroyed)
- Artillery bombardment
- Ground sweeps
- Arbitrary detention (anyone suspected of PKK support arrested)
- Torture systematic in custody
- Extrajudicial killings

PKK tactics:

- Guerrilla ambushes of military convoys
- Assassinations of village guards, government officials, teachers
- Bombings in cities (tourist areas, military targets, government buildings)
- Kidnappings
- Targeting Turkish civilians (especially in Kurdish regions considered collaborators)

The civilian toll: Both sides committed atrocities.

The death toll (1991-1999):

- Total deaths: 20,000-25,000 (added to 1984-1991 toll of 15,000-20,000)
- Turkish security forces: 6,000+ killed
- PKK fighters: 10,000-15,000 killed
- Civilians: 4,000-5,000 killed (by both sides)

1995: Turkey's largest operation

Operation Steel (March-May 1995):

- 35,000 Turkish troops invaded northern Iraq
- Penetrated 25 miles into Iraqi Kurdistan
- Target: PKK bases in Iraqi mountains
- Result: Bases destroyed, PKK temporarily weakened, Kurdish civilians killed, KRG protested (ineffectively)

Pattern established: Turkey regularly invaded northern Iraq despite it being under US protection. US objected but didn't stop Turkey (NATO ally more important than Kurdish sensitivities).

1998: Turkey Threatens War with Syria

Syria had supported PKK for years (hosted Öcalan, allowed PKK bases in Syrian-controlled Lebanon).

October 1998: Turkey mobilized troops on Syrian border, threatened invasion unless Syria expelled Öcalan and stopped supporting PKK.

Syria capitulated:

- **Expelled Öcalan (fled to Russia, then Europe)**
- **Closed PKK bases**
- **Signed Adana Agreement (October 20, 1998) committing to not supporting PKK**

The significance: Turkey willing to risk war over PKK. Syrian support (which had sustained PKK for decade) ended.

February 15, 1999: Öcalan Captured

Abdullah Öcalan fled Syria, sought asylum in Russia (refused), Europe (refused), eventually Kenya.

February 15, 1999: Turkish intelligence (MIT), with CIA assistance, captured Öcalan in Kenya, brought him to Turkey.

The trial:

- **June 1999: Death sentence (later commuted to life imprisonment when Turkey abolished death penalty)**
- **İmralı Island prison (sole prisoner initially)**
- **Remains imprisoned 2025**

August 1999: PKK Ceasefire

From prison, Öcalan called for ceasefire and withdrawal from Turkey:

- **PKK fighters withdrew to Iraqi Kurdistan and Europe**
- **Unilateral ceasefire declared**
- **Sought political solution**

The 1999 ceasefire lasted until 2004 (covered Part 4).

1991-1999 Turkish Kurdish policy summary:

Military:

- 20,000-25,000 killed in counterinsurgency
- 3,000+ villages destroyed or evacuated
- 2-3 million displaced
- Southeastern Turkey devastated

Political:

- Kurdish banned from public life, education, media
- Kurdish parties (DEP, HADEP) shut down when became too successful
- Kurdish politicians arrested (Leyla Zana, elected to Parliament 1991, imprisoned 1994-2004 for "supporting terrorism")

Economic:

- Southeastern Turkey remained poorest region
- Unemployment 40%+
- Government investment minimal

Result:

- PKK weakened (leadership captured, fighters withdrawn)
 - But Kurdish identity stronger than ever (oppression radicalized younger generation)
 - Problem unsolved—would reignite
-

VII. The 2003 Iraq War: Kurds as US Allies

September 11, 2001: Al-Qaeda attacked US. Bush administration determined to reshape Middle East.

2002: Bush identified Iraq as target (claimed weapons of mass destruction, links to terrorism—both false).

Kurdish position:

- Eager to overthrow Saddam
- Offered full cooperation with US
- Barzani and Talabani both allied with US

March 20, 2003: Invasion Begins

US-led coalition invaded Iraq from Kuwait. Turkey refused to allow US forces to invade from Turkish territory (Parliament rejected despite US pressure).

Kurdish role:

Northern front: Kurdish peshmerga, with US Special Forces and air support, fought Iraqi forces in north.

Battles:

- **Kirkuk captured April 10, 2003 (Kurds finally seized oil city)**
- **Mosul captured April 11, 2003**

Kurdish hopes:

- **Overthrow Saddam ✓**
- **Control Kirkuk (oil city) ✓**
- **Achieve independence?**

April 2003: Saddam's regime falls

Baghdad captured April 9. Saddam fled (captured December 2003, executed 2006).

Iraq occupation begins: US military administered Iraq (2003-2004), then Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), then transitional Iraqi governments.

Kurdish demands:

- 1. Keep peshmerga (Kurdish army)**
- 2. Maintain KRG (regional government)**
- 3. Federal Iraq (autonomy for Kurdistan)**
- 4. Control over Kirkuk**
- 5. Share of oil revenues**

US position:

- **Support Kurdish autonomy within Iraq**
- **Federal system acceptable**
- **But: No Kurdish independence**

Why US opposed Kurdish independence:

Turkey threatened:

- **Turkish military stated Kurdish independence would trigger Turkish intervention**
- **Turkey's nightmare: Independent Iraqi Kurdistan encouraging Turkish Kurdish separatism**

- US needed Turkey (NATO ally, bases for Iraq operations)

Iran and Syria also opposed Kurdish independence

Iraqi Arabs opposed (losing 20% of territory including oil)

US calculation:

- Kurdish autonomy within federal Iraq was acceptable to all parties
- Kurdish independence would destabilize entire region
- Not worth the cost

The message to Kurds: You can have autonomy. You cannot have independence. We will overthrow Saddam for you. But we will not support statehood.

Kurds accepted: Having autonomy within democratic Iraq was better than Saddam's genocide. Independence could wait.

VIII. Post-Saddam Iraq and Kurdish Autonomy (2003-2014)

2005: Iraqi Constitution

New Iraqi constitution (approved by referendum October 2005) established:

Federal system:

- Iraq divided into regions
- Kurdistan Region officially recognized
- KRG authority over: internal security, education, health, culture, some taxation

Kurdish rights:

- Kurdish language official (alongside Arabic)
- Kurdish flag recognized in Kurdistan Region
- Peshmerga legalized as regional force

Oil revenue sharing:

- Federal government controls oil
- Kurdistan receives 17% of budget (roughly proportional to population)

Disputed territories:

- Article 140: Process for resolving status of Kirkuk and other "disputed territories"
- Referendum to be held by 2007 (never happened—Baghdad blocked)

The Kurdish victory: Legal recognition of autonomy, federal structure, linguistic rights.

The Kurdish loss: No control over Kirkuk oil, no independence, still dependent on Baghdad budget.

2005: Jalal Talabani becomes President of Iraq

First Kurdish and first non-Arab President of Iraq. Largely ceremonial position but symbolically significant.

2006: KDP and PUK unify administrations

Under US pressure and facing ISIS precursor groups, Barzani and Talabani finally:

- Merged parallel governments
- Unified peshmerga (in theory—practice was complicated)
- One KRG cabinet

Massoud Barzani: President of Kurdistan Region (2005-2017)

The Kurdistan economic boom (2003-2014):

GDP growth: 8-12% annually

2004-2014 GDP:

- 2004: ~\$4 billion
- 2014: ~\$26 billion

Oil production:

- 2004: ~100,000 barrels/day
- 2014: ~400,000 barrels/day

Foreign investment:

- Turkish companies (construction, retail, energy)
- Western oil companies (ExxonMobil, Chevron, Total)
- Real estate development (Erbil transformed)

Erbil transformation:

- New airport (international terminal)
- Shopping malls

- Five-star hotels
- Luxury apartment complexes
- "The Dubai of Iraq" (promotional slogan)

But:

Who benefited?

The elite:

- Barzani family: Billions in assets (exact figures secret)
- Talabani family: Billions in assets
- Senior KRG officials: Hundreds of millions
- Connected business owners: Tens of millions

Ordinary Kurds:

- Government salaries increased but still low (\$300-600/month)
- Private sector jobs created but unemployment remained 15-20%
- Peshmerga wages improved (\$400-800/month)

Inequality:

- Luxury towers in Erbil while rural areas lacked electricity
- Elite drove Mercedes while peasants struggled
- Same patterns as before—oil wealth captured by few

The Barzani family businesses (partial list):

- Qaiwan Group: Construction, oil services, logistics
- Sarin Holding: Real estate, telecom
- Korek Telecom: Mobile provider (dominated market)
- Mass Group: Energy, construction
- Land holdings: Extensive (allocated to family)

The Talabani family businesses:

- PUK-affiliated companies in Sulaymaniyah
- Real estate in Baghdad and Erbil
- Media outlets

The mechanism:

- Government contracts awarded to family companies
- Licenses and permits required political connections
- Land allocated to elite
- Oil revenues supposed to go to public but significant portions diverted

- Transparency minimal

The democratic facade:

Elections held:

- 2005 Kurdistan Region parliamentary elections
- 2009 elections
- 2013 elections

But:

- KDP and PUK remained dominant
- Opposition parties (Gorran "Change" movement founded 2009) faced harassment
- Media controlled by two families
- Corruption endemic
- No accountability

Massoud Barzani extended his presidency beyond constitutional term limits (2013), refused to leave office until 2017.

IX. The Kirkuk Dispute and Baghdad Tensions (2003-2014)

Kirkuk remained the prize both Kurds and Iraqi Arabs claimed.

Kurdish argument:

- Kirkuk is historically Kurdish city
- Saddam's Arabization (1970s-2003) forcibly settled Arabs, expelled Kurds
- Article 140 of constitution requires reversing Arabization and holding referendum
- Kirkuk oil belongs to Kurdistan

Iraqi Arab argument:

- Kirkuk is Iraqi city
- Oil belongs to all Iraqis
- Kurdish claims are expansionist
- Referendum would be unfair (Kurds would vote for annexation)

The status 2003-2014:

- Iraqi government controlled Kirkuk nominally

- Kurdish peshmerga had de facto control over parts
- Oil revenues went to Baghdad
- Kurds wanted annexation
- Baghdad refused referendum

The oil dispute:

Kurdistan began independent oil exports (2013):

- Built pipeline to Turkey (bypassing Baghdad)
- Sold oil directly to Turkey and international markets
- Baghdad objected (claimed violation of constitution)

Baghdad's response:

- Withheld KRG budget allocation (17% of national budget)
- Threatened legal action
- Declared KRG oil exports illegal

The standoff:

- KRG couldn't afford to stop exports (needed revenue)
- Baghdad couldn't force compliance
- Turkey bought KRG oil (benefited from cheaper prices)
- Dispute continued

By 2014: KRG was producing 400,000+ barrels/day, exporting independently, earning \$5+ billion annually, but in constant conflict with Baghdad over legality and revenue sharing.

X. Syria: The Rojava Experiment (2011-2014)

March 2011: Syrian Civil War Begins

Arab Spring protests reached Syria. Assad regime responded with violence. Protests became armed rebellion.

Syrian Kurds' position:

- ~2-3 million Kurds in northern Syria
- Wanted autonomy but not initially separatist
- PYD (Democratic Union Party—PKK-affiliated) emerged as strongest Kurdish party

July 2012: Assad withdraws from Kurdish regions

Assad, facing Arab rebels, withdrew Syrian forces from Kurdish northeastern regions to concentrate on western Syria.

Power vacuum: Syrian Kurds seized control.

The PYD established autonomous administration:

- **Called "Rojava" (Western Kurdistan in Kurdish)**
- **Three cantons: Afrin, Kobani, Jazira**
- **"Democratic Confederalism" ideology (Öcalan's philosophy—decentralized, gender equality, multi-ethnic)**

The governing structure:

- **Local councils elected**
- **Women's equality mandated (co-chairs, male and female, for all positions)**
- **Multi-ethnic (Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians represented)**
- **Education in native languages**

2013-2014: Rojava consolidates

The YPG (People's Protection Units—Kurdish militia):

- **Founded 2011**
- **Defended Kurdish regions from Assad and rebels**
- **Included women's units (YPJ—Women's Protection Units)**
- **Effective fighting force**

The ideological challenge:

- **Rojava's democratic experiment contrasted with Assad's dictatorship**
- **But also contrasted with Iraqi Kurdistan's corruption and family rule**
- **Offered alternative vision of Kurdish autonomy**

Turkey's position:

- **Opposed Rojava vehemently (PYD linked to PKK)**
- **Viewed as Kurdish PKK statelet on Syrian border**
- **Turkey supported Syrian rebels fighting Kurds**

But: Rojava's biggest test was coming—ISIS.

XI. Iranian Kurdistan (1991-2014): Continued Suppression

1990s-2000s: Iranian Kurdistan remained most repressed.

1996: KDPI leader Assassination

Sadiq Sharafkandi (KDPI leader after Ghassemlou's 1989 assassination) was killed in Berlin by Iranian agents (1992—actually before period but showing pattern).

Iran's Kurdish policy:

- **KDPI banned, operating from exile**
- **Regular executions of Kurdish activists**
- **Minimal economic development in Kurdish regions**
- **Repression of Kurdish language and culture**

2000s: Occasional unrest

2004-2005: Protests in Kurdish cities after killing of Kurdish activist Shivan Qaderi. Iranian forces suppressed, killed dozens.

2011: Renewed KDPI activity

KDPI attempted to restart armed struggle from Iraqi Kurdistan. Iranian Revolutionary Guards conducted operations in Iraqi Kurdistan targeting KDPI (with Iraqi government acquiescence).

Iran-Iraq cooperation against Kurds: Despite being rivals, Iran and Iraq both opposed Kurdish independence and cooperated to suppress Kurdish armed movements.

Conclusion Part 3: The False Dawn Revealed

By 2014, Iraqi Kurdistan appeared successful:

- **Autonomous government functioning 23 years**
- **Economy growing 8-12% annually**
- **GDP \$26 billion**
- **Oil production 400,000 barrels/day**
- **Modern infrastructure in Erbil**
- **Elections held (if flawed)**
- **Compared to rest of Iraq (civil war, sectarian violence, chaos): Kurdistan was stable and prosperous**

But the reality beneath:

1. Not independent:

- Still legally part of Iraq
- No international recognition
- No seat at UN
- No sovereign powers (foreign policy, national defense dependent on Iraq/US)

2. Elite capture:

- Barzani and Talabani families controlled politics and economy
- Billions in family wealth while poverty persisted
- Corruption endemic
- Democracy was facade masking family rule

3. Oil wealth concentrated:

- Top 1%: captured 40-50% of wealth
- Bottom 50%: received 5-10%
- Inequality extreme
- Development benefits unequally distributed

4. External dependencies:

- Military: Depended on US protection (2003-2011 US troops, then continued support)
- Economic: Depended on oil sales (needed international buyers, pipelines through Turkey)
- Political: Baghdad controlled budget, US constrained options

5. Surrounded by hostility:

- Turkey: Opposed Kurdish statehood (PKK concerns)
- Iran: Opposed Kurdish statehood (own Kurdish minority)
- Syria: Initially opposed (Assad regime), even Rojava created competitive dynamic
- Iraqi Arabs: Opposed giving Kirkuk to Kurds

6. Internal divisions:

- KDP vs PUK rivalry never fully resolved
- Civil war (1994-1998) killed 5,000
- Two families competed for dominance
- Kurdish nationalism weaker than family/tribal loyalties

7. Pattern continued:

- US overthrew Saddam (2003) using Kurdish support
- US enabled Kurdish autonomy
- But US explicitly opposed Kurdish independence

- Pattern of "use but don't liberate" repeated again

The Turkish comparison:

Turkey 1991-2014:

- PKK war killed 40,000+ (20,000 this period)
- 3,000 villages destroyed
- 2-3 million Kurds displaced
- Öcalan captured (1999)
- No autonomy, no recognition, continued denial
- But 2013: Peace process began (covered Part 4—ultimately failed)

The Syrian development:

Rojava (2012-2014):

- Autonomous Kurdish region in Syria emerged during civil war
- Democratic experiment, gender equality
- But: Under constant threat from Turkey, Assad, and (soon) ISIS
- Pattern emerging: Autonomy during chaos, uncertain future

The Iranian stasis:

- No change, continued repression, executions, suppression

The question for Part 4:

Kurdish autonomy in Iraq was real. Economic development was genuine.

But was it path to independence or permanent subordination in more comfortable form?

Could Kurds leverage autonomy into statehood? Or would surrounding powers always prevent it?

2014-2025 would answer:

- ISIS would force Kurds to prove military capability
- Referendum (2017) would test international support for independence
- Trump's betrayal (2019) would repeat pattern of use and abandon
- Result: Autonomy consolidated, independence still forbidden

The "False Dawn": Progress that conceals continued statelessness. Development that masks dependency. Autonomy that permits everything except sovereignty.

40 million Kurds with language, culture, territory, resources, governance capacity, and proven military capability.

But still: No state. No sovereignty. No independence.

Because surrounding powers won't permit it. And external powers prioritize regional stability over Kurdish self-determination.

The pattern holds.

END PART 3

Part 4 will examine the Contemporary Betrayals (2014-2025): ISIS war making Kurds indispensable to US, 2017 referendum with 92% voting for independence (denied anyway), Trump's 2019 betrayal of Syrian Kurds to Turkey, and continuing pattern proving that even after proving every requirement for statehood—governance, military capability, economic viability, popular will—Kurds remain stateless because sovereignty is granted by power, not earned through merit.

Kurdistan: The Stateless Nation (Part 4 of 4)

Contemporary Betrayals (2014-2025)

Introduction: Proving Everything, Achieving Nothing

By 2014, Kurds had proven every requirement for statehood:

Distinct identity: 40 million people, ancient language, shared culture, 1,000+ years on same territory

Governance capacity: Kurdish Regional Government (Iraq) functioning 23 years, Syrian Rojava operating 2 years

Economic viability: Iraqi Kurdistan GDP \$26 billion, oil production 400,000 barrels/day, self-sufficient

Military capability: Peshmerga 200,000+ troops, had fought Saddam, would fight ISIS

Popular will: Polls consistently showed 80%+ of Iraqi Kurds wanted independence

Everything except: Permission from powers controlling Kurdish lands.

2014-2025 would demonstrate: Even after proving military capability (defeating ISIS), popular will (92% referendum), and governance capacity (managing crises), Kurds would be denied statehood because:

- 1. Turkey would never tolerate independent Kurdistan (would encourage Turkish Kurds)**
- 2. Iran would never tolerate it (would encourage Iranian Kurds)**
- 3. Iraq would never tolerate it (would lose 20% of territory and 40% of oil)**
- 4. Syria would never tolerate it (would lose northern border)**
- 5. US would never support it (would anger all four states, destabilize region)**

This Part demonstrates the ultimate proof: Sovereignty is not earned through merit. Sovereignty is granted by powers controlling territory. No matter how justified Kurdish statehood appears, it remains forbidden because surrounding powers united in preventing it.

The pattern's final confirmation:

- 2014-2017: US allied with Kurds against ISIS, Kurds saved thousands of lives, defeated genocidal enemy
- 2017: Iraqi Kurdistan held referendum, 92% voted for independence
- 2017: Baghdad, Tehran, Ankara, Damascus, Washington all said NO
- 2019: Trump abandoned Syrian Kurds to Turkish invasion
- 2025: Kurds remain stateless

Five hundred years of serving external powers' interests. Zero years of independence.

I. The ISIS Catastrophe and Kurdish Response (2014-2017)

June 2014: ISIS Conquers Mosul

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) emerged from Syrian civil war and Iraqi sectarian conflict. Declared caliphate, aimed to conquer Middle East.

June 10, 2014: ISIS captured Mosul (Iraq's second-largest city, population 1.5 million).

Iraqi army collapsed:

- 30,000+ Iraqi soldiers fled
- Abandoned weapons, vehicles, positions
- ISIS seized US-supplied equipment (Humvees, artillery, weapons)

June-August 2014: ISIS Advances

ISIS swept through western and northern Iraq:

- Tikrit, Fallujah, Ramadi captured
- Headed toward Baghdad (40 miles away at closest)
- Headed toward Erbil (Iraqi Kurdistan capital)

The Kurdish front:

Early August 2014: ISIS attacked Kurdish-controlled territories:

- Sinjar (Yazidi region)
- Makhmour (near Erbil)
- Gwer (25 miles from Erbil)

August 3, 2014: Sinjar Genocide

Sinjar was home to 400,000+ Yazidis (Kurdish-speaking religious minority, neither Muslim nor Christian, ancient faith).

ISIS ideology: Yazidis are devil-worshippers deserving extermination.

August 3-4: ISIS attacked Sinjar:

- **Peshmerga forces withdrew (outnumbered, outgunned—ISIS had captured Iraqi army weapons)**
- **Yazidis fled to Mount Sinjar (barren mountain offering minimal shelter)**
- **50,000+ trapped on mountain without food or water**
- **Temperatures 110°F+**

The massacre:

- **ISIS captured Yazidi villages**
- **Separated males from females**
- **Males: Executed (mass graves, thousands killed—estimates 3,000-5,000)**
- **Females and children: Enslaved (7,000+ women and girls sold in slave markets, raped, forced to convert)**
- **Elderly: Executed or left to die**

The siege: 50,000+ Yazidis trapped on mountain, dying from exposure, dehydration, starvation.

August 7, 2014: US Airstrikes Begin

President Obama authorized:

- **Airstrikes on ISIS positions**
- **Humanitarian aid drops to Mount Sinjar**
- **Limited US military advisors to Iraq**

The justification: Prevent genocide, protect US personnel in Erbil.

August 8-14, 2014: The Rescue

PKK fighters (Turkish Kurdish guerrillas) crossed from Syria into Iraq:

- **Opened corridor through ISIS lines**
- **Evacuated 20,000-30,000 Yazidis from mountain to Syria**
- **Lost fighters holding corridor open**

YPG/YPJ (Syrian Kurdish militia) also participated in rescue.

The irony:

- Turkish Kurdish "terrorists" (PKK) saved Yazidis
- Syrian Kurdish militia (labeled terrorists by Turkey) rescued civilians
- While Iraqi peshmerga (US-trained, equipped) had fled

The death toll from Sinjar:

- Killed: 3,000-5,000 (estimates)
 - Enslaved: 7,000+ women and girls (3,000+ still missing as of 2025)
 - Displaced: 360,000+ fled permanently
 - UN and multiple governments declared this genocide
-

II. The Syrian Kurdish Fight Against ISIS (2014-2015)

September 2014: The Siege of Kobani

Kobani (Ayn al-Arab) was Kurdish city in northern Syria on Turkish border.

September 15, 2014: ISIS attacked Kobani with:

- Tanks and artillery (captured from Iraqi army)
- Suicide bombers
- 10,000+ fighters
- Goal: Eliminate Rojava, massacre Kurds, establish caliphate on Turkish border

The defenders:

- YPG/YPJ (People's Protection Units): 2,000-4,000 lightly-armed fighters
- Civilians evacuated (200,000 fled to Turkey)

September-October 2014: ISIS advanced street by street:

- Controlled 70% of city by October
- US airstrikes assisted YPG (started September 27)
- Turkey watched from border (300 meters away), did nothing

Turkey's position:

- Refused to help YPG (viewed as PKK terrorists)
- Blocked Kurdish volunteers from crossing border to help
- Turkish tanks sat on border watching ISIS kill Kurds

International outcry:

- World watched on TV as ISIS besieged Kobani

- Turkish refusal to help was condemned
- US pressure mounted on Turkey

Late October 2014: Turkish concession

Turkey reluctantly allowed:

- Iraqi peshmerga to cross Turkey to reach Kobani (small numbers)
- Kurdish volunteers to cross (some allowed)
- Weapons supplies through Turkish territory

January 26, 2015: Kobani Liberated

After 4.5 months of fighting:

- YPG/YPJ defeated ISIS
- Retook entire city
- ISIS lost 1,000+ fighters
- Kurdish losses: 300-500 fighters

The significance:

- First major ISIS defeat
- Proved ISIS could be beaten
- YPG/YPJ gained international attention
- US increased support

The cost:

- Kobani was destroyed (70% of buildings damaged or destroyed)
- 1,600+ civilians killed
- But Kurdish resistance had succeeded

III. The US-Kurdish Alliance Against ISIS (2014-2017)

October 2014: US Strategy Shift

US recognized:

- Iraqi army was unreliable (had collapsed)
- Syrian opposition was fragmented, included jihadists
- Kurdish forces (peshmerga in Iraq, YPG in Syria) were most effective against ISIS

The alliance:

Iraqi Kurdistan:

- **US provided weapons, ammunition, training**
- **Air support for peshmerga operations**
- **US advisors embedded with peshmerga**

Syrian Rojava:

- **US allied with YPG/YPJ despite Turkish objections**
- **October 2015: US airdropped weapons to Kobani**
- **US Special Forces embedded with YPG**
- **Rebranded YPG as "Syrian Democratic Forces" (SDF) to include Arab fighters and reduce Turkish opposition**

The campaigns:

2015-2017: Liberation of ISIS territories

Iraq:

- **Peshmerga recaptured Sinjar (November 2015)**
- **Mosul campaign (October 2016-July 2017): Peshmerga secured northern approaches**
- **Kirkuk secured (peshmerga prevented ISIS advance)**

Syria:

- **SDF captured Tal Abyad (June 2015)**
- **SDF liberated Raqqa (ISIS capital, October 2017)**
- **SDF eliminated ISIS territorial control in northeastern Syria**

The Kurdish contribution:

Iraqi peshmerga:

- **1,800+ killed fighting ISIS**
- **10,000+ wounded**
- **Defended 1,000+ km frontline**

Syrian SDF:

- **11,000+ killed fighting ISIS (2014-2019)**
- **Bore brunt of ground combat**
- **Liberated 100,000+ sq km**

The US contribution:

- 8,000+ airstrikes
- \$2+ billion in weapons and equipment
- Special Forces advisory role
- Intelligence support

But no commitment to Kurdish statehood.

The pattern repeated: US used Kurds to fight ISIS, provided weapons and airstrikes, achieved US goal (defeating ISIS), but made NO promise of supporting Kurdish independence.

Kurdish leaders understood but had no choice:

- ISIS threatened genocide
- Fighting was existential, not optional
- US support was crucial
- Hope was that alliance would translate to political support later

That hope would be betrayed.

IV. The Independence Referendum (September 25, 2017)

By 2017, Iraqi Kurdistan had:

- Governed autonomously 26 years
- Fought alongside US against ISIS
- Controlled oil production (500,000 barrels/day by 2017)
- Functioning democracy (flawed but real)
- Economy of \$30+ billion
- Everything except: international recognition

Massoud Barzani (KRG President) decided to hold independence referendum.

The question: "Do you want the Kurdistan Region and Kurdistani areas outside the (Kurdistan) Region to become an independent country?"

The timing:

- ISIS largely defeated
- Kurdish military reputation enhanced
- Barzani's presidency extended beyond term limits—needed legitimacy
- Hoped international gratitude for fighting ISIS would translate to support

The opposition:

Baghdad (Iraqi government):

- Declared referendum illegal
- Constitution doesn't allow secession
- Threatened military action

Turkey:

- Called referendum "grave mistake"
- Threatened closure of borders
- Mobilized military near Iraqi border
- Would never tolerate independent Kurdistan

Iran:

- Closed borders to Kurdistan
- Conducted military exercises near border
- Made clear: independence unacceptable

Syria:

- Assad opposed (though preoccupied with civil war)

United States:

- Opposed referendum
- Stated "now is not the time"
- Asked Barzani to postpone
- Made clear: would not support independence

Why US opposed:

- Turkey (NATO ally) vehemently opposed
- Iran opposed (don't give Iran excuse for intervention)
- Iraq opposed (US needed Iraqi government cooperation)
- Would destabilize region just as ISIS defeated
- Kurdish independence would encourage other separatisms (Syria, Turkey, Iran)

UN, EU, Arab League: All opposed referendum.

Every major power opposed Kurdish independence.

September 25, 2017: The Vote

Despite international opposition, referendum proceeded.

The results:

- Turnout: 72.6%
- Yes (independence): 92.73% (2.8 million votes)
- No: 7.27%

The message: Overwhelming Kurdish support for independence. Democratic expression of self-determination.

The international response: Ignored it.

V. The Aftermath: Independence Denied (October 2017)

October 2017: The Crackdown

Baghdad, with support from Tehran and Ankara, responded immediately.

October 15-16, 2017: Iraqi Forces Retake Kirkuk

Iraqi army and Iranian-backed militias advanced on Kirkuk (Kurdish-controlled since 2014).

Massoud Barzani ordered peshmerga: Do not resist Iraqi advance.

Why Barzani ordered withdrawal:

- PUK faction (Talabani's party—Jalal had died March 2017) made deal with Baghdad and Iran
- PUK peshmerga withdrew, leaving KDP peshmerga exposed
- Fighting would have been civil war (Kurd vs Kurd) and war with Iraq simultaneously
- Barzani calculated: Better to lose Kirkuk temporarily than provoke full war

October 16, 2017: Iraqi forces and militias entered Kirkuk without major fighting.

The result:

- Kurds lost Kirkuk and oil fields (400,000 barrels/day)
- Lost 40% of KRG territory (disputed territories returned to Baghdad control)
- Lost billions in annual oil revenue

The sanctions cascade:

Iraq:

- Closed Kurdistan's international airports (Erbil, Sulaymaniyah)

- Banned international flights
- Imposed economic sanctions
- Demanded KRG hand over border crossings

Turkey:

- Closed airspace to Kurdistan flights
- Threatened oil pipeline closure
- Military exercises on border

Iran:

- Closed border crossings
- Economic pressure
- Coordinated with Baghdad

US position:

- Did nothing to stop Iraqi advance
- Urged calm and negotiations
- Made clear: consequences of referendum were Kurdistan's problem

November 1, 2017: Barzani Resigns

Massoud Barzani stepped down as KRG President (after serving beyond term limits since 2013).

The humiliation:

- Called referendum hoping for independence
- Got international condemnation instead
- Lost Kirkuk
- Lost 40% of territory
- Lost presidency

His legacy:

- Led Kurdistan through ISIS war
- Attempted independence, failed catastrophically
- Enriched family (billions in assets)
- Left Kurdistan weaker than before referendum

VI. The Lesson: Referendum Changed Nothing

92% voted for independence. International response: "No."

The reasons given by opponents:

"Now is not the time" (US position):

- **ISIS not fully defeated**
- **Would destabilize region**
- **Would complicate anti-ISIS coalition**

"Illegal/Unconstitutional" (Iraq position):

- **Iraqi constitution doesn't allow secession**
- **Kurdistan is part of Iraq**
- **Referendum has no legal effect**

"Threatens our interests" (Turkey, Iran):

- **Would encourage our Kurdish minorities**
- **We will not tolerate independent Kurdistan on our borders**
- **Will use military force if necessary**

The real reason: All surrounding powers united in preventing Kurdish independence. Their strategic interests (territorial integrity, regional influence, oil revenues, preventing separatism) outweighed Kurdish democratic will.

What the referendum proved:

1. Popular will doesn't matter without power:

- **92% is overwhelming mandate**
- **But sovereignty requires international recognition**
- **Recognition requires power, not legitimacy**

2. External support is conditional:

- **US allied with Kurds against ISIS (2014-2017)**
- **But opposed independence immediately after**
- **Alliance was tactical, not strategic**

3. Surrounding powers can strangle landlocked territory:

- **Iraq, Turkey, Iran all closed borders**
- **Kurdistan can't export oil without pipelines through neighbors**
- **Economic isolation was immediate and effective**

4. Internal Kurdish divisions remain:

- PUK betrayed KDP (withdrew from Kirkuk)
- Barzani-Talabani rivalry enabled Baghdad's advance
- Kurdish disunity prevented effective resistance

5. Timing is always "wrong":

- Before ISIS: "Focus on security first"
- After ISIS: "Now is not the time"
- There will never be "right time" because surrounding powers will never support independence

The pattern confirmed again:

- Kurds fought ISIS (for own survival and as US allies)
- Earned international gratitude and reputation
- Attempted to leverage into independence
- Denied immediately by all powers
- Punished for trying

The cost:

- Lost Kirkuk
- Lost 40% of territory
- Lost \$5+ billion annual oil revenue
- Kurdistan economy contracted 10-15%
- Unemployment increased to 20-25%

October 2017 demonstrated the iron law: Kurds can have autonomy. Kurds cannot have independence. The borders drawn in 1920s remain unchangeable.

VII. Turkey: The Final Peace Process Collapse (2013-2015) and Renewed War

2013-2015: The Peace Process

After 30 years of war (1984-2013, 40,000+ dead), Turkey and PKK attempted peace.

March 2013: Öcalan's Ceasefire Call

From prison, Abdullah Öcalan called for:

- Ceasefire
- PKK withdrawal from Turkey

- Negotiations for Kurdish rights

Turkish government (AKP party, Erdoğan as Prime Minister) engaged in secret talks with:

- PKK leadership in Iraqi mountains
- Öcalan through intermediaries

PKK response:

- Declared ceasefire
- Began withdrawing fighters to Iraqi Kurdistan

The hope:

- End 30-year conflict
- Grant Kurds cultural and linguistic rights (not autonomy)
- Disarm PKK
- Integrate PKK fighters into civilian life

2013-2014: Progress

Violence declined dramatically:

- Few clashes
- PKK fighters withdrawing
- Negotiations continuing

But: No formal agreement signed. Process remained informal, vulnerable.

June 2015: Elections Change Everything

Turkish elections:

- AKP lost parliamentary majority for first time since 2002
- HDP (pro-Kurdish party) won 13% (80 seats)

Erdoğan's response:

- Blamed HDP for his loss
- Decided to restart conflict to boost nationalism

July 20, 2015: Suruç Bombing

ISIS suicide bomber killed 33 leftist Turkish activists in Suruç (Kurdish town) preparing to help rebuild Kobani.

July 22, 2015: Escalation

PKK killed two Turkish police (claiming retaliation for government allowing ISIS attack).

Turkey responded by:

- **Airstrikes on PKK in Iraq**
- **Airstrikes on YPG in Syria (supposed anti-ISIS allies)**
- **Declaring peace process dead**

July 2015-Present: Renewed War

The conflict resumed with greater intensity than before.

Turkish operations:

Domestic:

- **Curfews in Kurdish cities**
- **Urban warfare in Diyarbakir, Cizre, Nusaybin**
- **Tanks and artillery used in residential areas**
- **2,000+ civilians killed (2015-2019)**
- **500,000+ displaced**
- **Kurdish cities' historic centers destroyed**

Cross-border:

- **Daily airstrikes on PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan**
- **Ground invasions (Operations Euphrates Shield 2016-2017, Olive Branch 2018, Peace Spring 2019)**
- **Targeting YPG/SDF in Syria**

Political:

- **HDP co-chairs arrested (Selahattin Demirtaş imprisoned 2016, remains in prison 2025)**
- **90+ HDP municipalities seized, mayors replaced with government appointees**
- **Thousands of HDP members arrested**
- **Kurds purged from government, universities, media**

The death toll (2015-2025):

- **10,000+ killed (PKK fighters, Turkish security forces, civilians)**
- **Added to previous 40,000 (1984-2015)**
- **Total 1984-2025: 50,000-60,000 killed**

2016: Failed Coup and Intensification

July 15, 2016: Military coup attempt against Erdoğan failed.

Erdoğan's response:

- Declared state of emergency (lasted 2 years)
- Purged 150,000+ from government, military, universities
- Arrested 60,000+
- Used emergency powers against all opposition, especially Kurds

The Kurdish position by 2025:

Political:

- No autonomy
- Kurdish parties continuously shut down or taken over
- Leaders imprisoned
- "Mountain Turks" rhetoric gone but repression continues

Military:

- PKK still active (reduced capacity)
- War ongoing in southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq
- Turkey conducting drone strikes and operations regularly

Economic:

- Kurdish regions remain poorest in Turkey
- Infrastructure destroyed in urban warfare
- Investment minimal

Pattern: 100 years (1925-2025) of Turkish state denying Kurdish autonomy through violence. Ideology changed (secular Kemalism → Islamic conservatism), methods evolved (village destruction → urban warfare), but result same: no autonomy for Kurds.

VIII. Trump's Betrayal of Syrian Kurds (October 2019)

2014-2019: Syrian Kurds as US Allies

Syrian Kurds (SDF/YPG) had been US's most reliable partner against ISIS:

- Defeated ISIS in Raqqa (2017)
- Controlled northeastern Syria
- Guarded 10,000+ ISIS prisoners in camps
- Protected 70,000+ ISIS family members in camps

By 2019:

- ISIS territorially defeated (March 2019)
- Syrian Kurds governed northeastern Syria
- US had 1,000-2,000 troops in Syrian Kurdistan

Turkey's demand:

- US abandon Syrian Kurds
- Allow Turkish military to invade
- Create "safe zone" to resettle Syrian refugees (and eliminate Kurdish autonomy)

October 6, 2019: Trump's Phone Call

President Trump spoke with Turkish President Erdoğan.

October 6, 2019, evening: The Announcement

White House announced:

- US forces withdrawing from northern Syria
- Turkey preparing military operation
- US will not support or be involved

Translation: We're abandoning the Kurds. Do what you want.

October 9, 2019: Turkish Invasion Begins

Operation Peace Spring:

- Turkish military and Syrian mercenaries invaded
- Targeted SDF/YPG (US allies for 5 years)
- US forces withdrew ahead of Turkish advance

October 9-17, 2019: The Attack

Turkish operations:

- Airstrikes on Kurdish positions
- Artillery bombardment of border towns
- Ground invasion 30 km deep into Syria
- Syrian mercenaries committed atrocities (videos of executions circulated)

Kurdish response:

- SDF fought Turkish forces
- Outgunned (Turkey has NATO weapons, air force)
- Appealed to US for protection—ignored

The chaos:

- **ISIS prisoners escaped (hundreds broke out during fighting)**
- **300,000+ civilians displaced**
- **SDF forced to make deal with Assad (accepted Syrian government troops to stop Turkey)**

The casualties:

- **300+ SDF fighters killed**
- **70+ civilians killed**
- **Thousands wounded**
- **300,000+ displaced**

October 17, 2019: Ceasefire

US negotiated ceasefire:

- **Turkey kept control of invaded territory (30 km deep, 120 km wide)**
- **SDF withdrew from Turkish "safe zone"**
- **Russia and Turkey agreed to patrol border**

The result:

- **Kurds lost 5,000+ square miles**
- **Lost towns: Ras al-Ayn, Tal Abyad**
- **Lost territory to Turkey and Syrian government**
- **Forced into dependence on Assad (enemy for 8 years) for protection from Turkey (US ally)**

US forces:

- **Some withdrawn**
- **Some redeployed to eastern Syria (to guard oil fields)**
- **Total US troops reduced to ~900**

The American reaction:

Bipartisan condemnation: Even Republicans criticized Trump

- **Betrayal of allies**
- **Gifting ISIS opportunity to regroup**
- **Damaging US credibility**

Trump's response: "Let someone else fight over this long-bloodstained sand."

Secretary of Defense James Mattis: Resigned in protest (December 2018, foreseeing this)

General Mazloun Abdi (SDF commander): "You are leaving us to be slaughtered."

Brett McGurk (former US Special Envoy): "Donald Trump is not a Commander-in-Chief. He makes impulsive decisions with no knowledge or deliberation. He sends military personnel into harm's way with no backing."

The Kurdish response:

Ilham Ahmed (SDF official): "We always warned about this. We were ready to defend America's interests, to fight ISIS. But what is happening now is a stab in the back."

The betrayal was complete:

- 5 years of alliance
- 11,000 Kurdish fighters killed fighting ISIS for US
- Guarded ISIS prisoners for US
- Trump abandoned them in phone call
- Allowed Turkey to invade
- Hundreds killed, hundreds of thousands displaced

The pattern: Use and abandon, repeated again.

1975: Kissinger used Iraqi Kurds against Iraq, abandoned them to Saddam 2019: Trump used Syrian Kurds against ISIS, abandoned them to Turkey

Different presidents, different decades, same betrayal.

IX. Iraqi Kurdistan: Survival Without Sovereignty (2017-2025)

Post-referendum recovery:

2017-2020: Economic crisis

- Lost Kirkuk oil revenues
- Budget cuts (salaries unpaid for months)
- GDP contracted 10-15%
- Unemployment 25-30%

2019: Deal with Baghdad

- KRG agreed to export 250,000 barrels/day through Iraqi state company
- Baghdad resumed paying KRG share of national budget (partially)

- Tensions reduced but disputes remained

2020: Oil price collapse (COVID-19 pandemic)

- Oil prices dropped to \$20/barrel (from \$70)
- KRG revenues collapsed
- Could not pay government employee salaries
- Economic crisis worsened

2021-2025: Partial recovery

- Oil prices recovered (\$80-90/barrel)
- Revenues increased
- Salaries paid more regularly
- But economy remains troubled

The political situation:

2018: Elections

KRG parliamentary elections (first since 2013):

- Low turnout (58%)—public disillusioned after referendum failure
- KDP: 45 seats
- PUK: 21 seats
- Gorran: 12 seats
- Others: 11 seats

2019: New president

Nechirvan Barzani (Massoud's nephew) became KRG President.

The pattern continues: Barzani family maintains control.

The corruption persists:

2020 protests:

- Unpaid salaries sparked protests in Sulaymaniyah
- Protesters demanded: Pay salaries, end corruption, hold officials accountable
- Security forces killed 5 protesters
- Government suppressed protests

The elite wealth:

By 2025:

- **Barzani family: Estimated \$3-10 billion (exact figures unknown—offshore accounts, shell companies)**
- **Talabani family: Estimated \$2-5 billion**
- **Top officials: Hundreds of millions each**

Ordinary Kurds:

- **Government salaries: \$400-700/month (when paid regularly)**
- **Private sector: \$300-600/month**
- **Unemployment: 20-25%**
- **Youth unemployment: 35-40%**

The dynasty solidifies:

Barzani family positions (as of 2025):

- **Nechirvan Barzani: KRG President**
- **Masrour Barzani (Massoud's son): KRG Prime Minister**
- **Multiple relatives in ministerial positions**
- **Control over security forces, intelligence, major industries**

The Talabani family:

- **Bafel Talabani: PUK leader (Jalal's son)**
- **Qubad Talabani: KRG Deputy Prime Minister (Jalal's son)**
- **Control over Sulaymaniyah province**

This is not democracy. This is family oligarchy with elections.

Relations with Baghdad (2025):

Disputes continue:

- **Oil revenues (who controls, how much KRG gets)**
- **Budget allocation (Baghdad withholds payments irregularly)**
- **Peshmerga salaries (Baghdad refuses to pay)**
- **Disputed territories (Kirkuk status unresolved)**

Military coordination:

- **Against ISIS remnants (cooperation)**
- **But tensions remain (Iraqi forces in disputed areas)**

The stalemate:

- **KRG remains part of Iraq**
- **Baghdad accepts Kurdish autonomy (reluctantly)**

- Neither side satisfied
- Status quo continues

Independence?:

- Not discussed publicly after 2017 failure
- Public support probably still 80%+
- But leadership learned lesson: Surrounding powers will prevent it

Iraqi Kurdistan 2025:

- Autonomous region functioning
 - Oil production 400,000 barrels/day
 - GDP \$25-30 billion (recovered from 2017 low)
 - Peshmerga 200,000+
 - But: Not independent, elite enriched, masses poor, democracy facade, surrounded by hostile powers
-

X. Syrian Rojava: Survival Through Russian and Assad Deals (2019-2025)

Post-US abandonment:

October 2019: After Turkish invasion and US withdrawal, Syrian Kurds made deals for survival:

Deal with Assad:

- Syrian government troops deployed to northern border
- Confronted Turkish forces
- Syrian flag raised (alongside Kurdish flag)
- Assad reclaimed nominal sovereignty

Deal with Russia:

- Russian military police patrolled border areas
- Russia mediated Turkey-Syria-Kurdistan relations
- Russia guaranteed (loosely) against further Turkish attacks

The result:

- Rojava lost western territory (Afrin 2018, Ras al-Ayn 2019, Tal Abyad 2019)
- Kept most of northeastern Syria

- Autonomous administration continued
- But now dependent on Assad and Russia, not US

2019-2025: Limited autonomy

What Rojava controls:

- Northeastern Syria (Jazira region)
- Local governance continues
- SDF remains armed
- Oil fields (though revenues go to Assad regime officially)

What changed:

- Assad regime present (checkpoints, officials)
- Russian and Syrian flags alongside Kurdish flags
- Less independence than 2012-2019
- But better than Turkish occupation

The SDF role:

Continues fighting ISIS:

- ISIS cells remain active
- SDF conducts counter-insurgency
- Guarding 10,000+ ISIS prisoners in camps (still, as of 2025)

US forces returned (limited):

- ~900 troops in eastern Syria (protecting oil fields)
- Some support for SDF
- But nothing like 2014-2019 partnership

Turkey's pressure continues:

Regular operations:

- Drone strikes on SDF leaders (dozens killed)
- Artillery bombardment of border areas
- Threats of new invasions

2022-2023: Turkish threats of new invasion (deterred by Russia and US warnings)

The population:

Demographics:

- ~2-3 million people (Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians)
- 100,000s displaced by Turkish invasions
- Severe economic conditions (sanctions, war damage)

Economy:

- Agriculture (wheat, cotton)
- Oil production (most revenues taken by Damascus)
- International aid (limited)
- Smuggling

GDP per capita: \$1,000-2,000 (estimate—official figures unavailable)

The assessment: Rojava survives but barely. Lost territories to Turkey, subordinated to Assad, dependent on Russian tolerance, facing Turkish threats. The democratic experiment continues but constrained. Independence is impossible—surrounded by hostile powers.

XI. Iranian Kurdistan: Protests and Continued Repression (2016-2025)

2016-2017: KDPI Guerrilla Campaign

Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) resumed armed operations from Iraqi Kurdistan:

- Attacks on Iranian military targets
- Iranian responses: Missile and drone strikes on Iraqi Kurdistan
- Brief escalation, then subsided

2022: Mahsa Amini Protests

September 16, 2022: Mahsa (Zhina) Amini, 22-year-old Kurdish woman, died in custody of Iranian morality police (arrested for "improper hijab" in Tehran).

The response:

- Nationwide protests erupted
- Kurdish regions at forefront
- "Woman, Life, Freedom" (Kurdish slogan) became movement's cry
- Protesters demanded regime change, women's rights, Kurdish rights

September 2022-January 2023: Uprising

Scale:

- Largest protests since 1979 revolution
- Millions participated
- Spread to 31 provinces

Iranian response:

- Security forces killed 500+ protesters (Iranian human rights organizations' count)
- 20,000+ arrested
- 4 executed for "war against God"
- Internet shut down
- Kurdish regions especially brutalized

Kurdish casualties:

- 150+ killed in Kurdish regions alone
- Proportionally highest death toll
- Iranian forces used live ammunition against protesters

The Kurdish role:

- Kurdish women led protests
- Zhina Amini was Kurdish (government called her "Mahsa"—Persian name)
- Kurdish regions most defiant
- KDPI and other Kurdish groups supported uprising

Result:

- Protests suppressed by early 2023
- Regime survived
- But legitimacy damaged
- Kurdish resistance continues underground

2023-2025: Continued Suppression

Iranian policy:

- Regular executions of Kurdish activists (20+ per year)
- Cross-border attacks on KDPI in Iraq
- Economic underdevelopment in Kurdish regions
- Cultural repression

The stalemate:

- Iranian Kurds most repressed of four
- No autonomy, no recognition, systematic violence

- But identity persists, resistance continues
 - Iranian regime secure despite unpopularity
-

XII. The Contemporary Status: Four Prisons, 40 Million Prisoners (2025)

Turkish Kurdistan:

- Population: 15-20 million Kurds
- Status: No autonomy, cultural suppression continuing
- War: PKK insurgency ongoing (50,000-60,000 killed 1984-2025)
- Political: HDP leaders imprisoned, mayors removed, parties shut down
- Economic: Poorest region of Turkey, war damage extensive
- Prospects: No change visible—Turkish state will never grant autonomy

Iraqi Kurdistan:

- Population: 6-7 million Kurds
- Status: Autonomous region within Iraq (legal but contested)
- Government: Functioning, KRG controls local affairs
- Economy: Oil production 400,000 barrels/day, GDP \$25-30 billion
- Elite: Barzani and Talabani families worth billions
- Masses: Unemployment 20-25%, salaries often unpaid
- Independence: Attempted (2017), failed, not feasible
- Prospects: Autonomy will continue, independence impossible

Iranian Kurdistan:

- Population: 8-10 million Kurds
- Status: No autonomy, systematic repression
- Resistance: KDPI operates from Iraq, protests periodic
- Repression: Executions, arrests, economic underdevelopment
- Prospects: Iranian regime collapse could create opportunity (unlikely)

Syrian Kurdistan (Rojava):

- Population: 2-3 million Kurds
- Status: De facto autonomy, subordinate to Assad nominally
- Territory: Lost 30% to Turkey, kept northeast
- Security: SDF guards ISIS prisoners, faces Turkish threats
- Economy: Devastated by war, limited resources
- Prospects: Survival uncertain—depends on Russia, Assad, US

The totals:

Kurdish population: 35-45 million (estimates vary)

With autonomy: 6-7 million (Iraqi Kurdistan only)

With no autonomy: 28-38 million (Turkey, Iran, Syria)

Death toll seeking autonomy (1925-2025):

- **Turkey: 50,000-60,000**
- **Iraq: 150,000-250,000 (including Anfal)**
- **Iran: 30,000-50,000**
- **Syria: 5,000-10,000**
- **Total: 235,000-370,000 killed**

Villages destroyed:

- **Turkey: 3,000-4,000**
- **Iraq: 4,500+**
- **Iran: 100s**
- **Syria: 100s**
- **Total: 8,000-9,000 villages**

Displaced:

- **Turkey: 3+ million (1990s)**
- **Iraq: 1.5 million (1988-1991)**
- **Syria: 500,000+ (2011-2020)**
- **Total: 5+ million displaced since 1980**

XIII. The Elite Beneficiaries: Who Profits from Kurdish Statelessness

The Barzani Family (Iraqi Kurdistan):

- **Estimated wealth: \$3-10 billion**
- **Sources: Oil revenues, border taxes, government contracts, land, businesses**
- **Control: KRG presidency, prime ministry, security forces, KDP party**
- **Generational: Massoud → Nechirvan (nephew, president), Masrour (son, PM)**

The Talabani Family (Iraqi Kurdistan):

- **Estimated wealth: \$2-5 billion**
- **Sources: Oil revenues, PUK-controlled regions, businesses**
- **Control: PUK party, Sulaymaniyah governorate, deputy PM position**
- **Generational: Jalal → Bafel (son, PUK leader), Qubad (son, deputy PM)**

Turkish State Elite:

- **Military-industrial complex: \$10+ billion annually from Kurdish conflict (weapons, operations, construction)**
- **Kurdish collaborators: Village guards, tribal leaders who allied with state (enriched through land grants, contracts)**
- **Nationalist politicians: Use Kurdish issue to mobilize votes**

Iraqi State Elite (Baghdad):

- **Control over Kirkuk oil (worth \$10+ billion annually)**
- **Kurdish autonomy useful: Blame Kurds for problems, use as leverage**
- **Military spending justified by Kurdish regions requiring security**

Iranian State Elite:

- **Revolutionary Guards: Budget increases justified by Kurdish insurgency**
- **Regional control: Suppressing Kurds demonstrates regime strength**

Syrian State Elite (Assad Regime):

- **Control over Syrian Kurdistan's oil production**
- **Kurds as convenient scapegoat and pressure point**

External Powers' Interests:

Turkey:

- **Territorial integrity (won't lose 25-30% of territory)**
- **Water control (Euphrates/Tigris headwaters in Kurdistan)**
- **NATO position: US maintains bases, Turkey maintains leverage**

Iraq:

- **Oil revenues: Kurdistan has 40-45% of Iraq's reserves**
- **Territorial integrity: Can't allow 20% of country to secede**

Iran:

- **Regional influence: Iraq, Syria as sphere of influence requires controlling Kurdish regions**
- **Prevent Kurdish independence inspiring Iranian minorities**

United States:

- **Alliance with Turkey (NATO):** Worth more than Kurdish independence
- **Regional stability:** Kurdish independence would destabilize entire Middle East
- **Oil access:** Prefer dealing with recognized states (Iraq) not unrecognized Kurdish entity
- **Kurdish proxies useful:** Can be used against ISIS, Saddam, Iran, etc. when needed

Russia:

- **Relationship with Turkey, Syria, Iran:** All oppose Kurdish independence
- **Kurdish regions as leverage:** Can threaten to support Kurds to pressure Turkey/Syria/Iran

The mechanism of elite enrichment from statelessness:

1. **Conflict economy:** War generates contracts (weapons, construction, services) 2. **Aid dependence:** Kurdistan receives international aid (distributed by elite) 3. **Monopoly control:** Families control oil, borders, contracts without accountability 4. **Lack of transparency:** No international oversight, no sovereignty means no standards 5. **Factional competition:** KDP vs PUK competition enriches both through separate corruption 6. **External powers:** Provide weapons, aid, support to favored factions (who take cuts)

XIV. The Pattern Across 500 Years: Use, Betray, Repeat

1514: Ottoman-Persian division split Kurdistan between empires 1920: Treaty of Sèvres promised independence 1923: Treaty of Lausanne erased promise, divided Kurdistan four ways 1946: Republic of Mahabad (Soviet-backed, 11 months, crushed) 1975: US-Iran armed Barzani, abandoned him to Saddam 1991: Bush encouraged uprising, watched Saddam crush it, intervened minimally 2003: US overthrew Saddam with Kurdish help, opposed independence 2014-2017: US allied with Kurds against ISIS 2017: Referendum 92% voted for independence, all powers said NO 2019: Trump abandoned Syrian Kurds to Turkey

The constant: External powers use Kurds as tools, achieve strategic goals, abandon Kurds when convenient.

The pattern is not random. It is policy.

Why external powers use Kurds:

1. **Geography:** Kurdish regions are strategically located

- Turkey-Iraq-Iran-Syria intersection
- Control of mountain passes, water sources, oil fields
- Buffer zones between rival powers

2. Military capability: Kurds are effective fighters

- Mountainous terrain expertise
- Tribal warrior traditions
- Motivated (fighting for survival)
- Peshmerga, PKK, YPG all proven in combat

3. Disposability: Kurds lack state protection

- No army that will retaliate for betrayals
- No international recognition means no consequences
- Can be used and abandoned without diplomatic cost

4. Availability: Kurds are always available as proxies

- Internal conflicts in four states create ready partners
- Desperate for external support (no other options)
- Will ally with anyone offering help

Why external powers never support independence:

1. Turkey's veto:

- NATO member, 2nd largest military in NATO
- Controls Bosphorus straits (critical)
- Kurdish independence would encourage 15-20 million Turkish Kurds
- Has threatened war repeatedly
- US/Europe prioritize Turkey over Kurds

2. Regional destabilization:

- Kurdish independence would encourage: Iraqi Shia/Sunni separatism, Syrian minorities, Iranian minorities, Turkish Alevis
- Entire Middle East borders (drawn by Sykes-Picot) could unravel
- Powers prefer dysfunctional status quo to chaotic redrawing

3. Oil control:

- Kurdistan has 40-45 billion barrels reserves
- Powers prefer dealing with recognized states (Iraq) for oil
- Kurdish independence complicates oil contracts, pipelines, revenues

4. Precedent:

- Successful Kurdish secession would legitimize self-determination claims globally
- Powers oppose self-determination (would lose territories themselves)
- Spain (Catalonia), UK (Scotland), Russia (Chechnya), China (Xinjiang, Tibet), India (Kashmir) all oppose self-determination principle

5. No strategic benefit:

- Kurds already provide military support without needing to grant independence
- Why give independence when you can get benefits without cost?
- "Why buy the cow when milk is free?"

The cynical calculation:

- Use Kurds when useful ✓
- Promise support to maintain cooperation ✓
- Achieve strategic goal ✓
- Abandon Kurds when goal achieved ✓
- Repeat when need Kurds again ✓

This is not hypocrisy. This is how power operates.

External powers' interests (Turkey alliance, oil access, regional stability) outweigh Kurdish self-determination. Every time. Without exception.

XV. The Questions That Remain

Can Kurds ever achieve independence?

Pessimistic answer: No. The surrounding powers' opposition is structural, not circumstantial. Turkey will never tolerate independent Kurdistan. Iraq will never voluntarily lose 20% of territory and 40% of oil. Iran will never risk precedent. Syria (whoever governs) will oppose. And external powers will prioritize relations with these states over Kurdish independence.

Optimistic answer: Possibly, if:

- Major war or crisis fragmenting Iraq or Turkey creates power vacuum
- International system changes to genuinely support self-determination
- Kurdish unity replaces factional division
- External power (US, Europe, Russia) decides supporting Kurdish independence serves interests

Realistic answer: Not in foreseeable future. The obstacles are too many, too powerful, too unified. Status quo (Iraqi Kurdistan autonomy, other regions repressed) will continue indefinitely.

What would genuine Kurdish independence require?

- 1. Military capability: Kurds have this (peshmerga, YPG proven effective)**
- 2. Economic viability: Kurds have this (oil, agriculture, water, demonstrated governance capacity)**
- 3. Popular will: Kurds have this (80%+ support independence)**
- 4. Internal unity: Kurds lack this (KDP vs PUK rivalry, PKK vs KRG tensions, four regions divided)**
- 5. International recognition: Kurds lack this (no major power supports)**
- 6. Surrounding powers' acceptance: Kurds lack this (all four states violently oppose)**
- 7. External power's commitment: Kurds lack this (US/Europe/Russia won't back independence)**

The requirements they have: Everything related to merit, capability, legitimacy

The requirements they lack: Everything related to power, international politics

This proves: Sovereignty is granted by power, not earned through merit.

What is the alternative to independence?

Continued autonomy in Iraq: Most realistic for Iraqi Kurds

- Accept autonomy within federal Iraq**
- Manage disputes with Baghdad**
- Develop economy within constraints**
- Hope for gradual improvement**

Eventual political rights in Turkey: Possible if Turkey democratizes

- Grant cultural/linguistic rights**
- Allow Kurdish political participation**
- Not autonomy (Turkey will never allow) but better than current repression**
- Requires major political change in Turkey (unlikely soon)**

Revolution in Iran: Could create opportunity

- If Islamic Republic falls, Kurds might gain autonomy
- But also might face new repressive regime
- Unstable, unpredictable

Assad's fall in Syria: Could enable greater Rojava autonomy

- But also could bring chaos, Turkish invasion, ISIS return
- Current limited autonomy might be best achievable outcome

Or: Continue fighting. Continue dying. Continue demanding independence that will never be granted.

The tragic choice: Accept permanent second-class status in four states, or continue resistance knowing independence is impossible but submission is worse.

Most Kurds choose resistance. Not because they believe they'll win. But because subordination without resistance is worse than resistance without victory.

Conclusion: The Largest Stateless Nation

40 million people. Ancient language. Shared culture. Contiguous territory. Oil wealth. Proven governance capacity. Demonstrated military capability. Democratic will expressed repeatedly.

Everything required for statehood except: Permission.

Kurdistan proves the central thesis of this case study series:

Sovereignty is not earned. Sovereignty is granted by powers controlling territory.

No amount of:

- Cultural distinctiveness
- Historical presence
- Resource wealth
- Economic viability
- Governance competence
- Military capability
- Democratic legitimacy
- International sympathy

will create a state if surrounding powers united in preventing it.

The comparison to Taiwan:

Taiwan has:

- De facto independence (separate government, economy, military)
- International trade relationships
- US military protection
- Recognition by 13 countries
- Democracy and prosperity
- But cannot declare independence (China threatens, US opposes)

Kurdistan has:

- No de facto independence (divided among four states)
- One autonomous region (Iraqi Kurdistan—partial autonomy)
- No international recognition
- No external military protection (briefly, then withdrawn)
- Democracy in one region, repression in three
- Cannot declare independence (Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria all oppose, US opposes)

Taiwan is ahead but both are trapped: achieving everything except sovereignty because surrounding powers and external powers united in preventing it.

The lessons:

1. Geography is destiny when you're strategic:

- Taiwan: 100 miles from China, controlling sea lanes, producing semiconductors
- Kurdistan: Between Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria, controlling water and oil
- Both: Too valuable to grant independence

2. External support is conditional and temporary:

- US abandoned Iraqi Kurds (1975)
- US abandoned Syrian Kurds (2019)
- US "protects" Taiwan but opposes independence
- Pattern: Use as proxies, maintain dependence, never grant sovereignty

3. Resources curse rather than bless:

- Taiwan semiconductors make it flashpoint
- Kurdistan oil makes it too valuable for surrounding states to release
- Valuable territories don't become independent—they become contested

4. Democracy doesn't equal sovereignty:

- Iraqi Kurdistan is functional democracy (flawed)
- Taiwan is vibrant democracy

- Both lack sovereignty—cannot make fundamental choices about their future
- Shows: Democratic governance and sovereignty are distinct

5. Statelessness can be comfortable:

- Iraqi Kurdistan has GDP \$25-30 billion, modern infrastructure
- Taiwan has GDP \$800 billion, advanced economy
- Both have achieved prosperity within subordination
- But prosperity doesn't resolve subordination

6. Elite benefit from status quo:

- Barzani/Talabani families worth billions
- Taiwan elite enriched through semiconductor monopoly
- Kurdistan elite profit from autonomy without accountability of sovereignty
- Taiwan elite profit from strategic importance
- Subordination enriches elite while constraining nations

7. Violence maintains statelessness:

- 235,000-370,000 Kurds killed seeking autonomy (1925-2025)
- China threatens Taiwan constantly
- Pattern: Subordinated populations face violence or threat of violence

8. The pattern doesn't change:

- 1920: Kurdish independence promised and betrayed
- 2017: Kurdish independence voted for and denied
- 1950: US began "protecting" Taiwan
- 2025: US still "protecting" Taiwan, opposing independence

Is the struggle worth it?

From outside: Kurdistan appears hopeless. 100 years of fighting, 250,000-370,000 dead, and still no independence. Why continue?

From inside: Subordination without resistance is worse than resistance without victory. Accepting permanent second-class status in four states is worse than continuing to demand rights, autonomy, eventually independence—even if independence never comes.

Kurdish saying: "No friends but the mountains."

The mountains provide refuge when external powers betray. The mountains are permanent when alliances are temporary. The mountains don't promise and then abandon.

But mountains don't create states either.

500 years after Ottoman conquest, 100 years after Lausanne betrayal, 40 years after Anfal genocide, 10 years after ISIS war, Kurds remain:

The largest stateless nation on Earth.

The proof that merit doesn't create sovereignty.

The demonstration that geography can be curse.

The victims of the system where strategic value guarantees subordination.

And the survivors who maintain identity despite everything.

Because survival itself, when everyone expects your extinction, is victory of a kind.

Even if it's not the victory they sought.

END PART 4

END KURDISTAN CASE STUDY

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